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RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE IN ACADEMICALLY SUCCESSFUL
LATINO/A STUDENTS

by

Dennis Heaton

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in

Education
(Curriculum and Instruction)

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ABSTRACT

Resilience and Resistance in Academically Successful Latino/a Students

by

Dennis Heaton, Doctor of Education

Utah State University, 2013

Major Professor: Dr. Sherry Marx
Department: Education

This work explored the academic success of 10 Latino/a students in Southern View School District, a school district in the state of Utah. The students and their parents, when available, were interviewed and the students' academic records were reviewed. The students were asked to identify a school person, teacher, administrator, or staff person, who could help explain their success. The school person was then interviewed. The data were collated and analyzed using resilience theory and the critical race-based constructs of resistance and resilience resistance. The construct of colorblindness was also used to discuss the participants' attitudes towards less successful Latino/a students and their families.

The work revealed that the successful Latino/a students accessed the protective factors of personal strengths and environmental resources to remain resilient and achieve in school. It was also discovered that the students' success was also a form of resistance that was explained using the constructs of conformist resistance and resilient resistance.

The student success was revealed as a way to resist oppression and remain in the educational pipeline. It was also discovered that student, parent, and school participants had adopted a colorblind ideology that assumed equal opportunity was available to all without regard to race. These observations led to the conclusion that the school system and the students of color it served would benefit from direct discussion of White privilege and what it means to be of a non-White racial group. The recommendation was that the school should adopt a systematic model of social justice education that could help more student access protective factors and facilitate critical conversations about race.

(124 pages)

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Resilience and Resistance in Academically Successful Latino/a Students

by

Dennis Heaton, Doctor of Education

Utah State University, 2013

The objective of this case study was to examine and explain the success of a group of Latino/a students whose educational success substantially exceeds the success of their peers. Ten middle school students, their parents, and selected school personnel who worked with them were interviewed. The student participants were purposefully selected based on their grades, attendance, and test scores. The adult participants were selected based on their relationship to the student participants.

The student participants were interviewed twice and the adult participants were interviewed once, using a semi-structured format designed to allow the interviewees to go beyond the interviewer's initial questions. The data collected during the study were analyzed using theories of resilience and resistance in an effort to discover how the students were attaining successful educational outcomes and how they were overcoming the challenges that caused many in their peer group to fail. Special attention was focused on the students' explanation of their success and the failure of others in their peer group, and the areas where the student perceptions agreed with or diverged from the explanations of their parents and teachers.

The study findings indicated that the successful students faced the same challenges of racism, economic hardship, and structural inequality that are often considered contributing factors in academic failure among Latino/a students. However, the student participants were able to access personal, family, and school resources that helped them better cope with adversity and remain engaged with the school system. Because the students came to view themselves as academically successful, they were able to use their success to resist racism and inequality in ways that contributed to continued success. It was also found that while the schools in the study made many quality efforts to assist all students, the success of this group of Latino/a students should not be considered an indication that racism and structural inequality were not present in the educational setting. The students were successful in spite of the challenges they faced, and the schools need to continue to make efforts and adopt policies that promote racial and structural equality in the educational environment.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Drs. Sherry Marx, Deborah Byrnes, Lucy Delgadillo, Scott Hunsaker, and Cinthya Saavedra for their time and willingness to participate in this process. I owe special thanks to Dr. Marx and Dr. Byrnes.

At the time that I thought I had reached a dead end and was seriously considering leaving the program, Dr. Byrnes stayed in contact with me and suggested I attempt to reconstitute my committee with Dr. Marx as chair. Dr. Marx followed up with me and convinced me to that this project could be done. Throughout the process, she provided encouragement, feedback, and expertise without which I never would have arrived at this point. I offer my most sincere gratitude to each of you.

I give special thanks to my family who tolerated and encouraged me. To my wife, LaTonya, goes all my love and appreciation. You have been my cheer section, my taskmaster, and my source of strength. Thank you for believing that I am smarter, tougher, and better than I will likely ever be.

Dennis Heaton

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Historically, Latino/a students in the U.S. have been a marginalized group that for many reasons has not experienced levels of success in school equal to that of white students. Latinos/as have been systematically excluded from education, offered lower levels of educational opportunity, and then been blamed for the failure by a system that blames the groups it fails (Garcia, 2001; Moreno, 1999; San Miguel & Valencia, 1998; Valencia, 1997a; Valencia, Villareal, & Salinas, 2002). Scholars have also found that Latinos/as have lower test scores, lower rates of enrollment in demanding academic courses, lower rates of high school completion, and lower rates of matriculation and completion of college than their white peers (Gándara, 2005; KewalRamani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnik, 2007). While there are certainly stories of Latino/a success and Latinos/as can be found in high status jobs like doctors, lawyers, and professors, the rates of success are not equal to those of whites. In the arena of K-12 education, many Latino/a students are still not experiencing equal success. A government report, *Status and Trends in the Education of Hispanics*, notes that Latino/a students are not achieving the same levels of success as other groups (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). This is not an easy or isolated issue. Even in schools and districts where strong efforts have been made and integration and overt equal access seems to exist, Latino/a students still face barriers to true educational equality (Noguera & Wing, 2006).

Traditionally Utah has not been considered a “Latino” center, but current trends are towards a more diverse population. The majority of this growth has come in the

Latino/a community. Utah's Latino/a population grew 234% between 1980 and 2000 and made up 9% of the population in 2003 (Solórzano, 2005). Southern View School District¹ in southwestern Utah has also experienced significant growth of its Latino/a population. From 2001 to 2010 the total student population increased from 7,176 to 8,365, an increase of 16.6%. During that same time period, the number of Latino/a students increased from 315 to 710, an increase of 125%. As a percentage of the total student population, the Latino/a population increased from 4.4% in 2001 to 8.5% in 2010.

According to the Utah State Office of Education, Latino/a students have the lowest graduation rate of any racial group based on the 2009 cohort graduation rate (USOE School Finance and Statistics, 2009). In Utah in 2009, only 70% of Latino/a students graduated high school compared with an overall student graduation rate of 88%. From 2005 to 2009, the percentage of Latino/a students who scored at the level of proficient or higher on the USOE Criterion Referenced Test averaged 20-30% lower than the rate for the overall student population. This battery is used to measure end-of-course student proficiency in language arts, mathematics and science (USOE School Finance and Statistics, 2009; Utah State Office of Education, 2009).

Despite the historic and current indications that Latino/a students have struggled and continue to struggle to achieve the same levels of academic success as their white peers, there are Latino/a students who are achieving at high levels. Students who succeed in spite of structural obstacles, unequal access to resources, and various forms of racism present an interesting area for study. How does this happen? Have these students simply assimilated into the dominate culture? Have they found a conscious or unconscious way

¹ A pseudonym.

of resisting domination by the mainstream culture? Have they developed a set of skills or resources that allow them to be resilient in a challenging environment? Or, is something else contributing to the success of high achieving Latino/a students?

These questions represent a gap in the literature that I have attempted to address by examining the experiences of ten Latino/a middle school students who have attained high levels of academic success in the Southern View School District. By discussing the success of these students with the students themselves, their families, their teachers and other school personnel, I attempted to uncover the factors that led to their success. It was especially powerful to learn about academic success from the perspectives of the successful students and to hear their views on their success, the system, and why few students like them are attaining similar success. To provide context for this examination of student success, a review of historical attempts to explain the underachievement of minority groups, an explanation of my interest in this area as a researcher, and an overview of the structure of the paper will be useful.

From 2005 to 2011, I served as the principal of Southwest Education Academy, the alternative high school in Southern View School District. Prior to this assignment, I was an English teacher at Cedar City High School for 7 years. For my last 7 years at Cedar High, I was the English-as-a-Second-Language coordinator for the school, and I taught an ESL class with mostly Latino/a students. If I were to offer a current summary of descriptors of myself, it would be a White, middle-aged, middle-class male who grew up a member of the dominant culture and religion in a rural town among people almost exclusively like me. On the surface, my background would not seem likely to have

caused me to be interested in or even aware of race and class issues in education and society. However, a number of my experiences created an awareness of factors that differentiate people based on race and class.

During my adolescent and teen years, two factors initiated the development of my awareness of class and race. My family had little financial security, and my father's two adopted sisters were Navajo. Because of our lack of money, there were times when my siblings and I went without material items we needed or would have liked to have. In school, not having equal financial means was highlighted by proximity to those who had more and the cost of full participation in school activities. Through my Navajo aunts and my biracial cousins, I vicariously experienced the racism they faced. I witnessed and heard accounts of overt racism as well as unintended racism enacted by otherwise well-meaning people who would have been shocked to have their language or actions challenged as racist.

When I was 20, I lived in Latin America for 2 years as a missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) church. I learned Spanish during that time. I also experienced a more diverse culture. For the first time I was also exposed to the deep resentment oppressed people feel toward oppressive powers, in this case the long history of the United States' interference in South American affairs. I was forced to reconsider what was normal, patriotic, and fair with input from other perspectives. It was both exhilarating and uncomfortable.

In my teacher preparation classes there was little direct, open discussion of race. Most of the students in my courses looked like me and had similar backgrounds. Even

after I began to teach and entered an M.Ed. program at the local university, there was little reason to critically examine race issues. However, my reality at school was that our Latino/a students were not achieving at the same level as white students. Because I spoke Spanish, my advisory group was soon composed of only Latino/a students. I was responsible for monitoring these students' progress and conducting two parent-teacher conferences each year. Through this contact with the students and their families, I became aware of the language, economic, and race issues my students and their families faced. The next school year, I was assigned as the school's ESL coordinator. It was evident that most of the teachers and staff I worked with located the problems that my Latino/a students faced within the student and the families themselves.

Early in my doctoral program, I had a class on whiteness theory. I again experienced simultaneous and contradictory feelings of exhilaration and discomfort. I was finally able to talk critically and openly about race issues that I previously had no vocabulary or venue to discuss. The discomfort came from the need to acknowledge that all but one of us sitting in the room were White and had benefited from our race. Some students were shocked and others became angry during this class. It was difficult to put aside ideas about merit. I am sure that we all felt we had worked hard to be in the program and that we deserved to be where we were. McIntosh's (1997) notion of an invisible knapsack and Helms' (1990) work on a positive racial identity were helpful in recognizing privilege and assuaging the inevitable guilt I felt at that time. For me, the excitement came from the newfound ability to grapple with whiteness and race issues that I had been able to recognize and feel, but not yet been able to critique or discuss.

In my own classroom, I began to have discussions with students about race and privilege. I knew that this could be sensitive, but I was surprised and pleased with the maturity and interest of all my students, minority and White, in this type of critical thinking. It was then I decided that I wanted to examine the ways that race and marginalization were influencing the educational process in my district. I wanted to find out what the barriers were for my struggling students and how they were finding ways to make it through the educational system.

The purpose of this study is to examine ways that successful Latino/a student's navigate the school system and avoid or overcome the challenges that stop many of their peers from achieving similar levels of success. First, the review of literature will identify other studies that have examined Latino/a student success and failure. Second, the methods section will explain the how the data was collected and analyzed. Third, the section on student stories will attempt to present the students, their families and the challenges they faced and overcame. Fourth, the findings section will highlight the setting and the challenges the students faced, and explore theoretical implications posed by the students' experiences. Last, the conclusion will summarize key findings and what they might mean for future research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Theories to Explain Latino/a Underachievement

Traditional theories that attempt to explain the underachievement of disadvantaged groups can be roughly divided into three groups—theories of deficit thinking, social reproduction theories, and cultural reproduction theories. These theories are not mutually exclusive. Each evolved over time as researchers attempted to address the weaknesses of existing theories and provide better frameworks for examining underachievement of certain groups.

Deficit Thinking

Deficit thinking is the process that locates the causes of failure within the person, family, or cultures of those marginalized groups who struggle to meet majority defined measures of social success. This tendency to identify failing groups, frequently people of color, by what they do not have is a common trait of deficit thinking. Henderson and Milstein (2003) noted that traditional efforts to understand unequal achievement among groups of students were based on a medical pathology model that gave rise to efforts to identify factors that seemed to lead to poor or undesirable outcomes. By identifying “risk factors” in the failing groups that are not present in the more successful majority group, educators and theorists have been able to ignore school, social, and economic factors and locate the failure within the failing group.

Valencia (1997b) placed theories of deficit thinking into three basic groups:

biological deficits, cultural deficits, and community deficits. These groups are roughly chronological phases that occur as theorists attempt to address the problems with the previous way of thinking about minority groups. From the 1890s to the 1930s, theorists and theories that explain educational and social differences in terms of claimed genetic and biological inferiority dominate accepted academic thinking. These theorists support their ideas using the emerging practices of standardized testing and race-based notions of heredity and eugenics (Valencia, 1997b).

As it became clear that there was no evidence to support a theory of biological deficits, scholars began to examine the culture and value systems of marginalized groups. Foley (1997) noted that as explanations based on biological deficits collapsed in the 1940s and 1950s, deficit theorists began to selectively appropriate ideas from the field of anthropology. Oscar Lewis' "culture of poverty theory," despite his protests about this use of his work, was attractive to deficit thinkers because selectively misusing it suited their ideological needs and allowed for continued theorizing of deficits of marginalized groups based on culture. This approach led to claims that people of color did not value education, were lazy, could not defer satisfaction, and did not have high expectations. Such thinking culminated in the idea that cultural deficits created and reproduced a cycle of poverty and failure.

Into the 1970s a new, more liberal group of deficit thinkers began to locate the unequal achievement in accumulated deficits in the environments of underachieving groups. This change in thinking shifted the focus to examining and identifying deficits in whole communities. Communities were blamed for social decay, drug abuse, violence

and predisposing their inhabitants for failure (Pearl, 1997).

Many current educators and scholars are repelled by the racist notions of deficit thinking, but as recently as 1994 some writers were drawing from this tradition to explain unequal achievement of different racial groups (Hernstein & Murray, 1994). In more subtle forms, deficit thinking is still prevalent in society as a way to explain the unequal achievement of different racial groups. Marx (2006) found a group of preservice teachers used some forms of deficit thinking to make sense of the Latino/a elementary students they were tutoring. She found that the tutors were assigning deficits to their students associated with color, culture, language, families, self-esteem, and intelligence. While deficit thinking is still an unsavory part of many conversations about race, other theories have emerged to examine the additional roles of social and economic structures and the distribution of power within society.

Social and Cultural Reproduction Theories

Theories of social and cultural reproduction augment the explanation of Latino/a underachievement in schooling, allowing critiques of the economic and structural forces involved in the maintenance of class stratification and the continued disadvantaging of racial and minority groups. Specifically, reproduction theories indict economic and institutional forces that tend to reproduce class structure and cultural dominance.

Bowles and Gintis (1976) discussed the way that schools tend to reproduce the status quo. They offered what they called the correspondence principle, which suggests that roles taught in school correspond to similar roles in the economy, and the concept of a hidden curriculum that teaches students that socially assigned roles are neutral and to be

accepted. They claimed that schooling corresponds to similar roles and practices in the larger economy, preparing students for their pre-determined places in the economic hierarchy of a capitalist society. This correspondence between schools and the economy solidifies the progression of working class students into working class adults who have few opportunities to attain social and economic success beyond that of their working class parents. Their concept of the hidden curriculum pointed to the unstated ways that classrooms and schools teach students that class structure, authority, and the rules and values of capitalist society are normal and to be accepted.

In a later study of different social classes, Anyon (1980), using the theories of Bowles and Gintis (1976), revealed the way that the hidden curriculum in school affects student and family expectations, teacher practices, quality of educational opportunity, and student work. She found that in working class schools, there was little expectation of intellectual effort and little choice involved in mostly rote learning. In middle class schools, students were focused on getting the right answer and a good grade. Children were asked to follow directions and make some decisions. In more affluent schools, work was often creative activities and students were asked to express ideas and apply concepts. Student assignments often included written work involving individual thoughts and expressions. In elite schools, work involved developing the students' intellect. Students were asked to conceptualize rules and use these rules in problem solving. Top academic quality was expected. Anyon's observations make clear the stark contrast between the schooling of working class and affluent students, and the difference in life and economic opportunity these disparate educational experiences provide.

The work of theorists like Bowles, Gintis, and Anyon revealed problems with the concepts of merit and individual achievement and claims that those who fail to succeed have earned their failure. However, Bowles and Gintis noted that a capitalist system required the underachievement of a large portion of the population in order to maintain itself. As racial minorities have historically been part of the working class, they are primary targets of the way that economic structure uses schools to continue the oppressive conditions they endure.

While social reproduction theories rely heavily on economic forces to explain inequality, cultural reproduction theories expand the analysis to include an examination of the privilege granted to the dominant culture by schools. Cultural reproduction contends that normalizing and legitimizing the dominant group's practices, beliefs, and value system are the elements that maintain inequality. To describe cultural attributes possessed by each person as a member of a certain class under this model, Bourdieu (1977) coined the term "cultural capital." MacLeod (1995) defined cultural capital as the general cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills that are passed from one generation to the next. Power imbalances in society create a system that assigns different value to the cultural capital of different groups. The dominant group sets its own cultural capital as the standard by which other groups are judged.

Placing a higher value on one form of cultural capital than on others privileges the dominant groups and allows it to set its values, practices, and beliefs as the aspired to standard. This enables the dominant group to be portrayed as neutral and normal. This portrayal is generally accepted by schools, which then tend to devalue any forms of

cultural capital that do not conform to this standard. Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) asserted that the state through schooling and policies that reward “high status” knowledge over “low status knowledge” rewards those who possess the cultural capital of the dominant group which leads naturally to higher educational and economic achievement of the dominant groups and lower achievement for others.

Despite the usefulness of social and cultural reproduction theories, they have been criticized for their rigidity and inability to address agency and resistance of students and teachers who are acting within these forms of reproduction. MacLeod (1995) pointed out these weaknesses in his discussion of reproduction theories:

Structuralist theories, which stress that history is made “behind the backs” of the members of society, overlook the significance and relative autonomy of the cultural level and the human experience of domination and resistance. “In the Structuralist perspective human agents are registered simply as the effects of structural determinants that appear to work with the certainty of biological processes. In this grimly mechanistic approach, human subjects simply act as role bearers.” Culturalist theories, on the other hand, pay too little attention to how structurally embedded material and economic forces weigh down and shape human experience. (p. 21)

In order to account for the agency of those actors within the process of domination and to illuminate individual stories of opposition, theories of resistance offer the ability to examine human agency in ways the theories of reproduction ignore.

Newer Models for Understanding Latino/a Achievement

Resistance and resilience theories allow researchers to better describe and explain the complexities of power imbalances, social interactions, and the responses of marginalized groups and individuals to marginalizing forces. These strengths of

resistance and resilience theories allow for an examination of the strengths of the students and their families and highlight their abilities to be actors rather than merely entities to be acted upon. At a theoretical level, this is important because it allows a critical examination of the students' experiences that acknowledges that much of the difficulty they face arises from existing social structures. Resistance theories focus on the ways that individuals and groups push back against oppression and the effects that this resistance has on those who resist.

Resistance Theory

Solórzano and Bernal (2001), drawing on the work of Henry Giroux, explained that resistance can have transformational or emancipatory effects if those engaging in resistance have a critique of social oppression and are motivated by social justice. Resistance theories focus on the relationship between oppressive social structures and the resisting actions of those being oppressed. These theories recognized that oppressed groups can resist or act against the oppression of the educational system in ways that can be self-defeating, conformist, or transformative (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001).

The concept of resistance is rooted in the poststructuralist discourse on power and marginalization. It has been refined by critical theory, critical race theory, and Latino/a critical race theory scholars who have argued that the work of early theorists is overly deterministic without the option of individual action (Pruyn, 1999). Solórzano and Bernal (2001) asserted that even the work of more recent scholars who study power and resistance, like Foley (1990), MacLeod (1995), and McLaren (1993, 1994), is too focused on self-defeating resistance, which only helps recreate the oppression that forced the

resistance in the beginning. In arguing for a method for examining resistance, Solórzano and Bernal (2001) offered a model that can distinguish between four different types of student oppositional behavior: Reactionary behavior, self-defeating behavior, conformist resistance, and transformational resistance (p. 318).

This model may be useful in understanding Latino/a student success because it allows for student actions to be understood based on the students' level of social critique and motivation for social justice. Solórzano and Bernal are not alone, many scholars have studied the intersections of power, race, class, and gender that affect marginalized groups and the forms of resistance that emerge from this confluence (Bell, 1987; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Olivas, 1995; Parker, 1998; Pizarro, 1998; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002; Solórzano, Villapando, & Oseguera, 2005; Spann, 1995).

The model offered by Solórzano and Bernal allowed educational scholars to examine student resistance based on the level of understanding of oppression and the potential of the action to bring about change and help the student carrying out the resistance. These authors suggest that students who are simply acting out or engaging in disruptive behavior are engaging in reactionary behavior. Self-defeating resistance is a form of resistance in which the actors may have a limited critique of social oppression, but their actions are not likely to lead to positive change or social justice. Dropping out of school could be an example of self-defeating resistance. Conformist resistance is the set of actions of students who are working for social justice, but are not working to challenge or change the system of oppression. The fourth form of resistance, transformational

resistance, contains both a critique of social oppression and a desire for social justice. Here, students have some awareness of social conditions and oppression, and are moved to action by a desire to see social justice. This type of resistance holds a much deeper understanding of oppression and the possibility of effecting social change. The authors note that this type of resistance will manifest itself in different ways, but that it will have similar qualities and attributes.

Resilience Theory

While resistance theories focus on types of oppression and the way that oppressed groups react to oppression, resilience theories focus on those who overcome oppressive challenges and the personal characteristics and resources that facilitate this ability to overcome the negative effects of oppression. Resilience theories emphasize the contextual factors and personal resources that a person or a group uses to overcome ongoing challenges or stressors rather than framing the struggle in terms of oppression and resistance to oppression.

Resilience is a theoretical concept that has evolved as a way to describe and analyze success of people and groups with a broad spectrum of challenges that indicate they should fail. Garza, Reyes, and Trueba (2004) offered, “Resilience is defined as the ability to confront and to resolve problems and the capacity to utilize personal or social resources to enhance limited possibilities” (p. 11). A number of scholars have overtly tried to shift the focus of resilience research from a pathology, deficit, “at-risk” model to a strengths-base developmental approach (Benard, 2004; Brown, D’Emidio-Caston, & Benard, 2001; Henderson & Millstein, 2003). Gonzalez and Padilla (1997) explained,

“Resilience offers a new perspective from which to view academic achievement; rather than focusing on the shortcomings of students who are at risk of failure, the resilience construct attempts to identify the factors that account for success” (p. 315).

The construct and its theoretical base emerged from work in the field of psychology as researchers attempted to understand why large numbers of people, especially children, are able to overcome risk factors that are frequently associated with failure (Masten, 1994; Rutter, 1987). Resilience theory also has roots in psychological research that focuses on personal, family, and community level risks to positive life development (Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten & Powell, 2003; Rutter, 1985; Werner & Smith, 1992). However, researchers interested in explaining academic success have adopted a resilience framework to examine education and identify the factors that seem to contribute the success of students who are identified as likely to fail (Alva, 1991; Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Benard, 2004; Brown et al., 2001; Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997; Henderson & Millstein, 2003; Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009). While overall child development contributes to academic outcomes, it is the more specific notion of academic or educational resilience that is of special interest here.

Educational resilience focuses on the way the personal, social, and environmental resources blunt the potentially negative effects of stress factors on students. Resilience manifests differently in different people, but there are specific features called protective factors that appear from case to case. Werner and Smith (1992) explained that while “resilience is a characteristic that varies from person to person, protective factors or

mechanisms are more specific and more narrowly defined” (p. 5). They also note that protective factors only become apparent when a person experiences a stressor and is able to have a positive outcome rather than the negative one that would be predicted by existing risk factors. Having access to these protective factors and accessing them to avoid a negative outcome while experiencing life stress or ongoing conditions of “risk” is resilience. There are a myriad of overlapping and related reports on how this process works.

Benard (2004) offered an inclusive model in which she summarizes these resources into the categories of personal strengths and environmental protective factors, including: social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and sense of purpose (p. 14). She also groups an inclusive but not exhaustive list of personal attributes she has identified in the literature for each category. Social competence, which includes responsiveness; communication; empathy and caring; and compassion, altruism, and forgiveness; problem solving, which includes planning; flexibility; resourcefulness; critical thinking and insight. Autonomy, which includes positive identity; internal locus of control and initiative; self-efficacy and mastery; adaptive distancing and resistance; self-awareness and mindfulness; and humor and sense of purpose, which includes goal direction, achievement motivation, and educational aspirations; special interest, creativity, and imagination; optimism, and hope; faith, spirituality, and sense of meaning.

Benard first identified the following environment factors and organized them in her 2004 work as a set of criteria that can be used to analyze the experiences of resilient youth and to evaluate and design prevention and education programs. They include

caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities to participate and contribute. She placed these factors in a matrix that highlighted the three common environments, family, schools, and communities, where they operate.

Resilient Resistance

The concept of “resilient resistance” provides a bridge between the frameworks of resistance theory and resilience theory that will allow the use of analytical tools from both schools of thought. Yosso (2000) offered this concept as an explanation of this intersection. She explains that resilient resistance is a combination of the work of theorists who study academically successful Latino/a students (Alva, 1991; Arrellano & Padilla, 1996) and the aforementioned model of resistance of Solórzano and Bernal. These researchers identify social and personal characteristics that seem to allow some students to succeed despite a variety of stressors in their personal lives and educational experiences. Other researchers have summarized these personal and environment characteristics as factors that can protect against stressors (Benard, 2004; Henderson & Milstein, 2003).

Yosso (2000) suggested that the majority of the students experiencing resilient resistance would fall somewhere on the intersection of conformist and transformative resistance posited in the model of Solórzano and Bernal. That is, by being resilient, students are also demonstrating resistance. However, students demonstrating resilient resistance use strategies that leave the structures of domination intact while helping the students succeed. Resilient resistance “is also a process by which students strategically challenge inequality, even though they often cannot or do not fully articulate the

structural nature of inequality” (p. 182). Resilience theory compliments resistance theory and can offer rich explanations of behavior, especially at the confluence of conformist resistance and transformational resistance from the model of Solórzano and Bernal.

Critical Race Theory

Much of the theoretical “space” and the vocabulary for discussions of resistance and resilient resistance and related methods for challenging subordination and inequality in education can be traced to the work of scholars in CRT. Drawing from the work of legal scholars, Matsuda and colleagues (1993) identify six themes that define this line of theoretical inquiry:

1. Critical race theory recognizes that racism is endemic to American life.
2. Critical race theory expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness and meritocracy.
3. Critical race theory challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law.... Critical race theorists ... adopt a stance that presumes that racism has contributed to all contemporary manifestations of group advantage and disadvantage.
4. Critical race theory insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities of origin in analyzing law and society.
5. Critical race theory is interdisciplinary.
6. Critical race theory work toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression. (p. 6)

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) built on the work in critical legal studies in their work on CRT and education. Solórzano and Bernal (2001) referred to many of these elements of CRT in their discussion of a theory of transformational resistance. In this study of Latino/a success in a traditional educational environment, constructs that emphasize the importance of lived experiences, acknowledge the ubiquity of racism, and challenge meritocracy and colorblindness will be highly useful. Thus, critical race theory will assist

in understanding the experiences these successful Latino/a students and explaining how they seem to be able to avoid or overcome the social and educational challenges that prevent their peers similar levels of traditional school success.

Studies of Academically Successful Latino/a Students

Some scholars during the past two decades have attempted to examine the success of Latino/a students rather than explain their failure. There have been some qualitative efforts, but much of the work has been statistical analyses that have provided correlations between academic success and factors that likely assist the students who succeed. The following summaries offer a view into the challenges Latino/a students face and the work that attempts to describe their success. The existing research is also intriguing because it highlights some common threads among the experiences of successful Latinos that could focus additional research and suggest new perceptions and ideas to educational policymakers and practitioners.

Cordeiro (1990) examined the success of 20 Mexican-American students considered at risk in two different high schools. She identified the students as successful because they were all pursuing an honors diploma and recognized them as at-risk due to low socioeconomic status and the educational attainment of their parents. She found that the students faced a number of difficulties, including language difficulties, financial challenges, and lack of support from parents. The students also reported that they spent little time with most of the other Latino/a students in their schools because few others of this group were in their honors classes. However, the students tended to identify

themselves as Mexican-American and frequently formed friendships and spent time with other Mexican-American students who were in the honors program. Most of the students exhibited a positive attitude towards school that seemed to emerge from previous academic successes and contributed to seeking additional opportunities to succeed in school.

In addition, many of the successful Latino/a students participated in activities outside the “regular” school structure including Upward Bound, mentorship programs, and sports. Participants highlighted their belief that they had good teachers who were well-prepared academically and pedagogically, cared about them personally, and explained difficult academic concepts well. They also felt that their teachers were better than teachers in “regular” classes.

Alva (1991) conducted a study to examine the characteristics of Mexican-American 10th-grade students in senior high school in Los Angeles to identify the reasons why some were academically successful while others were not. She used the construct of academic invulnerability to evaluate why some of the students are successful while others from similar socio-cultural backgrounds are not. She describes academically invulnerable students “as those who sustain high levels of achievement, motivation and performance, despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly and, ultimately, dropping out of school” (p. 19). The study surveyed 384 students who were selected based on Mexican heritage, enrollment in tenth grade, residence in the United States since at least seventh grade, and no current participation in special education, gifted, or English-as-a-second-language programs. The survey solicited

information about the students' sociocultural background, personal resources, environment resources, and self-appraisals of their situations.

The results indicated that successful students shared the environmental quality of "higher levels of educational support from their teachers and friends" (Alva, 1991, p. 30). In terms of personal attitudes or "subjective appraisals," successful students felt encouraged and prepared to attend college; enjoyed coming to school and being involved in high school activities; experienced fewer conflicts and difficulties in intergroup relations with other students; and experienced fewer family conflicts and difficulties. The study also highlighted "the primacy of the school's college preparatory climate in differentiating academically invulnerable and vulnerable students..." (p. 31). Alva concluded that research and policies for Mexican-American students should shift focus from school failure to school success. Her findings support the notion that protective personal resources and students' positive self-appraisals do mitigate the risk of academic failure among students.

Using qualitative interview methods, Gándara (1995) conducted a study of 50 successful Chicano adults who had earned a Ph.D., M.D., or J.D. She noted that most of her participants were relatively light-skinned and were not of traditional Mexican phenotype. They cited the importance of literacy in their homes while growing up and offered self-discipline, hard work, and persistence as personal qualities important in their success. Some reported that, as high school students, they were not placed in the academic classes necessary for entrance into college. Rather, they had to demand admittance to the college preparatory academic track. One effect of entering an academic

track was that they were separated from most other Latino/a students at school. To negotiate the potential conflicts of this isolation, some of the participants reported that they developed separate personas for the school and the neighborhood. The participants also identified the importance of mentors and role models such as teachers, counselors, priests, college-attending older siblings, and other adults outside the family as making important contributions to their success.

The concept of academic invulnerability was used by Arellano and Padilla (1996) to examine the success of 30 Latino/a university students. Participants were selected based on their Mexican heritage, admittance to a selective university, and successful completion of at least one academic year. Students were placed in groups of 10 based on their parents' educational attainment level: Group 1 had parents with 11 or fewer years of schooling; Group 2 had at least one parent who graduated from high school; and Group 3 had at least one parent who completed college. This structure allowed the researchers to consider the parents' ability to help the students make their way through the educational system. Seventy-three percent of participants were tracked into a gifted and talented (GATE) program by third grade. Only two attended a public school with no tracking, the rest attended religious and nondenominational private schools or a military school.

The researchers found important and common factors in the participants' academic success: parental support and encouragement; an optimistic outlook and belief that success was possible regardless of the obstacle or challenge persistence and drive to succeed; and a positive social identity based on ethnicity. Students in groups one and two also reported the critical importance of a mentor or role model in setting and reaching

academic goals. The researchers noted that personal and environmental resources were particularly important to the students in groups one and two. Group three, with its higher SES, followed a more mainstream path to academic success. The high levels of identification and participation in gifted programs was also noted because of the traditionally small numbers of minority students who are placed in such programs and the increased feelings of self-efficacy, self-confidence, and sense of purpose that such status confers.

Using a database that included 2,169 Mexican-American high school students in three California high schools, Gonzalez and Padilla (1997) conducted a study of the factors that contribute to academic resilience. They focused on the role of peers, family, teachers, cultural identity, and the school environment as sources of support. They attempted to discover whether three variables, a supportive academic environment, a sense of belonging, and cultural loyalty, could predict student grades. The researchers used grade point average (GPA) to identify resilient students. They found that a supportive academic environment and a sense of belonging at school were significant predictors of resilience. Family and peer support and the value placed on school were also factors in predicting academic resilience. There was some evidence that a positive cultural identity and other cultural influences can contribute to resilient outcomes. Based on their findings, the authors strongly advocated for additional research based on a resilience framework. They believe such efforts aid in developing intervention and prevention programs for youth that are sensitive to their specific needs within the context of their cultural and school environments.

In a study of Puerto Rican high school students and dropouts at an urban high school, Flores-Gonzales (2002) examined the factors that contribute to “school kid” identity versus those that lead to a “street kid” identity. She adopted an identity formation framework for her analysis. She found that the most academically successful students were somewhat isolated because of their participation in special academic programs and their peer groups were composed of other academically successful students. The conflicts arising from being different from most of their peers based on school success prompted some students to create separate school and neighborhood identities. Her analysis identified a number of factors related to school that were likely to improve the odds of academic success. However, her recommendation that schools provide real, practical guidance to help students form high but realistic expectations for themselves through conversations that address the tough issues of race and discrimination was especially salient. Additionally, she suggested schools should encourage strong relationships, high standards, and allow multiple school identities for students.

Perez and colleagues (2009) examined the risk-factors, personal protective factors, and environmental resources of 110 undocumented Latino/a high school, community college, and university students. They identified undocumented status, socioeconomic status, and parental education level as important risk factors. Some of the personal protective factors they considered were giftedness, parental valuing of education, and bilingualism while family environment, extracurricular involvement, and volunteerism were identified as important environment factors of resilient students. Based on their data, the researchers identified 22% of the students sampled as resilient.

This designation was assigned to those students reporting both high levels of risk and high levels of personal and protective factors. Two of their general findings are relevant here: that academic success was related to personal and environmental resources, and that, when multiple personal and environmental resources were present, academic performance was generally positive, even in the presence of multiple sources of psychosocial risk.

Similar to Gándara's findings, this study showed that giftedness, valuing school, extracurricular participation and volunteerism were strongly associated with high academic performance among undocumented students. They also found that resilient students had access to more environmental protective factors than their less-successful peers. Higher levels of value placed on school by parents and greater participation in the school community through extracurricular and volunteer activities were identified as the factors most correlated with school success. The authors noted that importance of these environment factors highlights the need for students to have the opportunity to engage supportive adults and peers in pro-social ways at school.

These studies of academically successful Latinos suggest that there are marginalized groups of student who are resisting the damaging effects of oppression. While the language varies somewhat, these studies also seem to concur with Benard's (2004) assertion that when students possess or have access to certain personal or environmental protective factors, they are much more likely to succeed. Such conclusions suggest that researchers should find additional opportunities to study the success of marginalized student both to explain their success and determine if other students would

have equal success if schools and other social structures were better at helping them develop their own personal and environment resources.

CHAPTER III

STUDY PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

There are increasing numbers of studies that attempt to examine the academic success of specific groups of students. However, few of these examine the factors that contribute to the successes of Latino/a students. Even fewer studies attempt to listen to the successful students and those close to the students explain why they are successful. To address this gap, I conducted a case study of ten successful Latino/a students, in Southern View School District using ethnographic techniques to explore how these students were able to resist the psychological and social forces often associated with high rates of academic failure in this group, and how they remained resilient in the face of adversity.

Research Questions

The research questions asked in this study were as follows.

1. How do high achieving Latino/a students, their parents, and their teachers believe the students are achieving academic success?
2. What factors do all parties believe make success difficult?
3. What factors do all parties believe assist in success?
4. What are the conflicts and overlaps among the accounts from students, parents and teachers/other adults?
5. What do these conflicts and overlaps reveal and explain?

The Case Study

As Stake (2005) pointed out, “Case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied” (p. 443). Thus, while this effort was bounded as a case and by case study methods, I used some ethnographic techniques. The case was bounded by the geography of Southern View School District and the criteria used to identify those invited to participate as “successful” Latino/a students. Glesne (2006) noted, “In qualitative case studies, data tend to be gathered through the ethnographic tools of participant observation and in-depth interviewing” (p. 13). Stake (2005) classified case studies into three categories: intrinsic, instrumental, and multiple case or collective case study. These categories fall roughly on a continuum from small and individual, to modest and issue-based, to larger and community or system-wide in scope. Because this study was focused on an issue, inquiry into the success of a small group of Latino/a students, it was best identified as instrumental.

While grounded theory was not a focus of this work, I have been informed by Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) work on grounded theory. Two of their notions were of particular interest to me, theoretical sensitivity and the constant comparative method. Before and throughout the study, I referred to relevant literature to maintain my theoretical sensitivity. I also employed a recursive process of comparing the categories and themes that emerge during analysis to the existing data from this and other studies to help me know if the data was sufficient and to alert me if more data was needed to address the important areas of the study. I was attracted to these elements of grounded theory because of their analytical usefulness, not because I believed the world has a set

reality and that I would discover it through this process.

This study was conducted in the Southern View School District in Utah. As previously identified, the Latino/a population in Utah (Solórzano, 2005) and Southern View School District is growing rapidly. In Utah, graduation rates and test scores indicate that Latino/a students are achieving at far lower rates than the student population as a whole (USOE School Finance and Statistics, 2009; Utah State Office of Education, 2009). The participants were located in two different middle schools in the largest town in this school district.

Participants

The group of participants for the study was composed of successful Latino/a students in the Southern View School District, their parents, and school personnel at their schools. For this study, success was defined as above average attendance, grades, and standardized test scores. Clearly, there are many definitions of success and any such definition can have problems and challenges. McNeil and Valenzuela (2001) noted the dangers of focusing too narrowly on test scores. Legal scholars (e.g., Matsuda et al., 1993) have used critical race theory to challenge notions of objectivity and meritocracy, while scholars in education like Solórzano and Yosso (2001) have used critical race theory to push back against notions of neutrality and meritocracy in schools. Other scholars like Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2005) have asserted that people are competent and have knowledge that extends far beyond the scope of school-base success and knowledge. However, studies of this type seem to use a definition that suites the study

purpose and context while acknowledging that success might be defined differently by the study participants and other scholars.

Once preparatory work for the study was complete, and I received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at my university. I asked teachers in the target middle schools to provide the names of Latino/a students who matched the stated criteria to me. School administrators conducted an additional search of the student information system to identify potential participants and to verify that the students identified by the teachers met the inclusion criteria for the study.

This process yielded a list of 10 potential student participants at each middle school in the district. The school administrators agreed to deliver a letter to each of these students for me that described the study and asked the student and parents to consider participating. Seven students at one school and three at another returned the letter to the school expressing interest in participating. I then arranged to meet with these students and their school administrator at their respective schools. I explained to the students about the study and made arrangements to contact their parents to go over and sign an informed consent. All ten of these students and their parents agreed to participate and were included in the study. During the first interview, I asked the students to identify a teacher or other adult at their schools to whom I should speak about their academic success. I then contacted these school staffers and invited them to participate in an interview about the student who identified them and about academic success in general. Glesne (2006, p. 34) called this purposeful sampling in the selection of study participants. The students were the primary participants in the study, but their families and the school staff people I

interviewed also provided valuable information.

Data Collection

Data was collected in this study via interviews, observations, and document reviews over a period of 4-6 months. Two semistructured interviews were conducted with each student and recorded for later transcription. Before the study I created a list of interview questions for the students, parents, and teachers (see the Appendix). After the first set of interviews, I created a set of questions for the second student interview. During the interviews, I held loosely to the interview questions, but allowed the conversation to go where ever the interviewee(s) took it. The parents of each student were invited to participate in an interview in their home or other preferred location. I was able to visit the home and interview the parents of all but two of the student participants. Once the students had agreed to participate in the study, I asked each of them to identify a recent teacher to whom I should speak about their academic success. I then invited the teachers identified by the students to participate in an interview. Only one teacher chose not to participate. All of the interviews were recorded and later transcribed to facilitate data analysis.

Much of the information collected in this study came in the form of interviews. The word interview or *inter view* seems to suggest a sharing of views and experience between a teller and a listener. In this way, the voices of the students in this study can be given a venue to emerge, take shape and convey meaning. Critical race and Latino/a critical race traditions allow the voices and experiences of an oppressed group to be heard

by all and to challenge “the bundle of presuppositions, perceived wisdoms, and shared cultural understandings persons in the dominant race bring to the discussion of race” (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993, p. 462). In this case, the story the students told of their daily experiences, their reactions to racism and daily micro-aggressions, and their continuing desire and struggle to succeed is the substance of the whole process. Tate (1997) noted that critical race theory takes special interest in those moments when people of color transcend stereotypes and successfully negotiate institutions. As a group the students in this study were successful within the structure of the school and social system, yet they struggled to maintain what they had gained and to fend off continued and daily challenges. Their stories were individual, sometimes coming together, sometimes diverging; all were valid and important accounts of their experience and achievement.

As a tool for researchers, critical race theory provides a way to recognize the experiences of people of color as knowledge that is legitimate, valuable and capable of empowering the teller of the experience (Calmore, 1995). Matsuda (1995, p. 63) put it this way, “Those who have experienced discrimination speak with a special voice to which we should listen.” With this in mind, scholars have accepted and utilized the stories of oppressed groups as both evidence of and a valuable method for explaining oppression and social inequity, as well as for challenging them. As will be seen in descriptions and accounts of the students in this study, there was no one “voice” or story for Latino/a students, even in a group so closely related in geography and time. However, as Delgado (1990) pointed out, there are common threads and core common experience with racism and oppression among people of color that will allow the use of the term

story in discussing these students, their successes and their challenges. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) asserted that no complete analysis of educational system can be conducted, nor can anything be truly know about education in the communities of people of color without the voices of community members being heard and valued.

I felt a sense of excitement as the study coalesced and began to take form. I began to know the students as I listened to them tell me about their experiences. I was able to see different perspectives on their success through the information I was gathering from their parents and teachers. I found myself reviewing the notes I had taken during the interviews and listening to the recording of their interviews. When I began to formally analyze the information I had collected, their stories began to take the shape. I worked to make sense of how they experienced school and social interactions, and how they achieved success in school. I found myself marveling at their hard work and determination.

By keeping a researcher journal, I was able to record my impressions from each setting and during all other aspects of data gathering. I also reviewed student documents, such as student work and archival information from the student data system and cumulative files. I was flexible in choosing the setting for interviews in order to accommodate the participants, but school was the primary location for student and teacher interviews while interviews with the family were conducted in their homes. It was important to me to have multiple methods for collecting data as well as multiple participants with diverse perspectives to increase the “trustworthiness” of my data (Glesne, 2006, pp. 37-38). This “triangulation reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth

understanding of the phenomenon in question” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 5).

Data Analysis

Glesne (2006) explained:

Data analysis involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read so that you can make sense of what you have learned. Working with the data, you describe, create explanations, pose hypotheses, develop theories, and link your story to other stories. To do so, you must categorize, synthesize, search for patterns, and interpret data you have collected. (p. 147).

She also advised that the analysis begin during and be done simultaneously with data collection. As my case was a group of students, it was natural to organize the data according to the individual participants as it was collected. I also sorted the data according to broad categories or themes. It was important for me to make notes to myself in my research journal so that themes or momentary insights were not lost and could be reviewed at another time.

I anticipated that the general categories for sorting the data might arise from the notions of resiliency, resistance and resilient resistance as well as from the data itself. Some categories were: students’ attempts to change the system, personal strengths and resources, conforming to beat the system, and shows awareness of racism/oppression. I was also surprised by some categories that emerged. One example was racial colorblindness among students, parents, and teachers. Doing at least some of the initial analysis during the data collection phase helped me recognize if additional questions need to be asked or some areas of inquiry were dominating or being neglected. Reviewing the information collected from the first student interviews helped me establish new lines of

questioning or the need for additional information in the second student interviews or in interviews with the families or teachers.

Once the data was collected and the interviews had been transcribed, I began the “formal” process of sorting and coding the printed material. First, I carefully read the interview transcripts, highlighting and annotating passages. At the same time, I referred to the notes I had made in my research journal, and made notes in a separate notebook about potential code categories and my impressions of the data. I also began the process of cross-referencing data or collating it by labeling my notes by interviewee name and transcript page number. In second phase of data analysis, I re-read and sorted the data using the codes or “buckets” that had emerged during the first reading and sorting. I used my notes and cross referencing from the first step to do assemble chunks from interviews and my research journal into code groups or themes. Third, I began to compare what I was finding to what I had read in the literature to see what fit, what could be new or different and what should probably be discarded. Last, I began to write attempting to represent the participants’ stories and analyze their experiences in a way consistent with the literature and their experiences as they had explained them to me.

The Researcher

Creswell (2003) noted that qualitative research is interpretive and places the researcher in sustained and intensive contact with study participants. Thus, researchers must, “explicitly identify their biases, values, and personal interests about their research topic and process” (p. 184). Such disclosure is necessary to make clear the ways the

researchers and their experiences color the overall study and the interpretation of the resultant data. Glesne (2006) added, “Qualitative researchers are interpreters who draw on their own experiences, knowledge, theoretical dispositions, and collected data to present their understanding of the other’s world” (p. 175). As was discussed in the introduction, my own life experiences have caused me to become deeply interested in race, privilege, and how school success and failure are explained by students, parents and school personnel. It has become impossible for me to simply accept the position that school systems are impartial and fair. I am bothered by the assertion that race does not matter as long as teachers make a sincere effort to treat all students equally. I believe that it is important to refuse to accept explanations that tend to place the blame for school failure on the failing students and their families. These experiences and beliefs were what motivated me to attempt to examine and explain why some Latino/a students in the Southern View School District are succeeding while others are not. In the next section, I have attempted to present what I found during my time with these students in the form of their stories.

CHAPTER IV

STUDENT STORIES

The stories here represent what was told to me by the ten student participants in the study, their parents, and the school personnel at their schools. Clearly, it is only a selection of what was said as directly including everything would be impossible. As such, both the process of collecting the information and writing about the student experiences is influenced by my own attitudes and biases. While I would not present this rendition of the students' experiences as their "truth or reality," I would argue that it can share the meaningful knowledge that they have accrued through their daily living. From their knowledge, I believe it is possible to better understand the challenges they face, the sacrifices they make, and the sometimes uncomfortable positions they occupy as they succeed in a system where many of their peers fail.

Santiago

Santiago was an eighth grader who was quite slight of build and short compared to his peers. He was generally shy, but articulate and thoughtful. During our conversations, it was clear from his responses that he wanted to talk to me about his achievements and that he had thought independently about issues like race and success. He said he was proud of his academic success. His comments indicated that he believed that academic success comes from trying hard, caring about school, and having family support. He stated that his mother monitored his grades regularly and encouraged him "to get straight A's and if I get a B she only wants me to get it up." He also pushed himself

academically because of his future goals, “I know I really have to get good grades and do the best I can, so I can get into Success Academy. I want to be a surgeon.”

Santiago believed that school success is a path toward life success. Although he had a limited understanding about how he might reach this goal, he indicated that he was going to apply for the local early college high school (a school district chartered high school where students can earn an associate’s degree while earning a high school diploma), which he heard about from his school counselor. He had positive relationships with the administration and teachers at his school. Through these relationships, he could readily seek assistance and information that helped him achieve in school and supported him when he faced a challenge.

Santiago stated that he considered himself Guatemalan because that was where his father was from, but that he also thought of himself as Latino. His parents divorced and his mother was remarried. Because they have different last names, it was only when I was requesting consent from parents that I realized that Santiago and Jaime, another student in this study, were stepbrothers. Santiago’s parents owned their home, but this financial commitment required his father to work away from home as a truck driver and laborer in the oilfields. I was not able to meet Santiago’s father, but Santiago told me that his whole family loves the occasional weekends when he can come home. His family seemed supportive. I saw Santiago and Jaime doing homework together when I arrived at their home to speak with their mother. Santiago explained that they support each other in school and life. He told me that all the kids did their homework when they arrived home from school. If they did not attend to it right away, their mother insisted that their

schoolwork get done before they could do other activities.

Santiago appeared to derive at least a part of his self-concept from his ability to perform well in school. As he explained, “When I get low grades, I really do not feel smart...I always try to pressure myself so I get good grades in math.” His siblings also did well in school, and he felt pressure to attain similar levels of success. He told me, “If I see them getting good grades, I want to get good grades. If I don’t, I feel bad and weird.” When I questioned Santiago about challenges that might be unique to Latino/a students, he was able to explain that Latinos/as do faces challenges that their white peers may not. He identified racism as a challenge, saying, “If they try to focus on school and somebody is being racist to them, it can put stress on them.” He also noted that the language ability of Latino/a students and their parents affects the student’s ability to perform in school.

Additionally, Santiago described a friend who was affected by immigration issues. He explained that, “His sister was, like, getting deported, so he has really hard things about that. He did come to school some days, but on the days he did come, he wasn’t really focused on school.” I asked Santiago to describe a situation or a program that could help all Latino/a students do well. He told me, “Well, it would need people, like, who understand Latinos. Maybe Spanish speakers, too, because when they get here they speak Spanish and stuff like that.” He told me that he thought students would come to a program that helped them and the end result would be to help them “have better lives.”

Mrs. H, the teacher to whom Santiago asked me to speak, described Santiago as

hardworking and dedicated in school. She told me, “Santiago, especially, he would do really nice work. Everything was really well done. He seemed pretty conscientious about what he was doing. He didn’t just slap it together.” She attributed Santiago’s academic success to his home environment, “There must be something to do with the home environment.” She said, “I knew it was expected, because I had talked to his parents.” She noted that Santiago carefully monitored his grades and would get frustrated if he had a missing assignment. Santiago would deal with the frustration by coming in to talk with her and working to remedy the situation. Although she told me she viewed Santiago as a bright student in the top of his class, she thought that was so shy and humble that he would not claim to be smart. “He wasn’t ever one to, say, brag about final scores or who even pointed out that he got 100% on something.” She noted that Santiago and some of his siblings did participate in an after school 4H program designed to help students with academic and social development.

Like Santiago and his teacher, his mother, Maria, attributed academic success to hard work and the efforts of her family. She explained that a friend of the family had struggled for what she perceived as a lack of family support.

En primer lugar tienen que ver los padres....Tengo un ejemplo de un amigo de ellos, que el año pasado estaba mucho mejor. Pero este año ya sé que sus estudios se vinieron bien para abajo, porque no tiene el apoyo de sus papás. Pienso yo que en primer lugar está el apoyo de sus papás. También tiene que ver la motivación en la escuela.

(In the first place it has to do with the parents. I have an example of a friend of my children, who did much better last year. This year I know that his studies have come way down because he doesn’t have support from his parents. I think that the most important thing is support from the parents. But also it depends on the student’s motivation in school.)

Santiago's mother believed school success was important to his future, and that the school was doing all that it should to assist him. She stated that Santiago's teachers and the administrators have high expectations for him.

However, she recognized that not all Latino/a parents felt the same way. She offered an example of a parent she knew whose child was in a fight at school. The parent felt that the fight started because her child was Latino, and she told Santiago's mother that the school was racist. Santiago's mother disagreed and cited the fact that her children do well in school; the teachers know them by name and call her if there are problems. However, she did describe a situation in which a white student gave Santiago a hard time and called him "brown," "Mexican" and other racially charged names. Santiago was able to work through this with the help of his brother, Jaime, without resorting to a violent confrontation.

Serena

Serena was a well-spoken, intelligent young lady who went out of her way to be friendly. She was in eighth grade. Although she spoke Spanish at home, her English language skills were excellent. Had I not known Spanish was her first language, I would not have guessed from speaking with her. Serena had a dark complexion and appeared to me to be of a possibly Polynesian or African-American rather than Latino/a heritage. I noticed that she was aware of her height and skin tone as she mentioned these characteristics during our conversations, saying, "I usually try to stick out and it's like me no matter what." To a follow up question if standing out makes her uncomfortable, she

continued, “Well, it’s just like, well mostly dark...among all of the girls, I’m kind of the darkest so it’s like...but I kind of feel comfortable about it. It’s me and it doesn’t matter how I look. It’s me.” It may be that her physical appearance set her apart from her Latino/a peers as well as her white peers. She was also a stylish dresser. She enjoyed assembling unique and eye-catching clothing. Several of the school staff members mentioned that she would stop by to show her clothing to teachers she trusted to see what they thought of her fashion attempt.

Serena’s family rented a house at the edge of a farm. Her mother told me they liked the space and the quiet. The drawback was that the bus stop was about half a mile down a gravel road that can be difficult in bad weather. The family was recovering from the economic impact of an injury to her father six months earlier. Her mother told me things had been rough for a while but now everything was working well. Serena had a little brother who was about kindergarten age and a younger sister of ten who had Down syndrome. She spent time with both of her siblings and was caring and thoughtful with her younger sister. She stated that she thought it was important to be a role model to her siblings and to help others. Her empathy and thoughtfulness for others was evident in school as well. She often helped others with school work, was an office aid, and was one of the two students who asked me if the work I was doing on this project would be shared with the school district and if I thought it would help other students.

Serena had well-developed relationships with her counselor, principal, and teachers that served her well in negotiating school. She told me that her counselor had helped her through a difficult time the previous year and that her principal had told her

about the local early-college high school and insisted that she consider attending.

Although she was not certain, she said she would like to be a doctor or a lawyer. She understood the link between school success and the ability to reach her goals. She told me that she wanted to take advanced placement classes and attend the local early-college high school so that she could earn scholarships and attend college. She said that she gained this understanding from her circle of trusted school personnel.

Serena's outgoing nature and good relationships with school personnel figured in her explanation of how she succeeded, "I do my homework, and if I don't understand something, I usually ask a lot of questions. I am not afraid to ask questions because I know it's going to be good for me and for anybody else." She also acknowledged the role her parents and family played in her attitude and school work. "I have to say that my parents encourage me a lot and they tell me if I work hard now in the future it'll pay off." She explained, "And, I just think school is fun." Serena's family made sacrifices for her to be in school and like several other students in the study, she was well aware of the sacrifices and used them for motivation. "My parents always try to tell me how life was back in Mexico, and how difficult it was, and how unfair it was. They told me one of the reasons they came here was for better schooling for me and my brother and my sister." She stated that she completely trusted that her parents would do anything they could to help her succeed.

Serena gave an example of racist behavior without much prompting, but what struck me most about her story was the way she explained her relationship to the students who were excluding the Latino/a students in P.E. class once the situation was over.

It's mostly about the identity kind of stuff. I was like...there was a group of Hispanics there and we were always picked last, which kind of ticked me off, because I was like, we're all human. So...it happened for a few weeks, and I got angry, and I went to talk to Mrs. Nelson (the school counselor) and tell her that it hurt being treated like that...and she helped me out. She told my teacher what was happening, and he completely understood. So, we were all okay.

I continued by asking her how she dealt with students who were racist towards the Latino/a students. "Well, it felt distant for a moment...you hurt me, but then it's like, we're all human. We all make mistakes. I pretty much forgave them, and some of them are my friends now, so...." She said that it was important to prove racist people wrong by succeeding. She also believed that racist behavior needed to be challenged, "because if you ignore it, you are becoming more weak." She felt that racist thinking underestimated her and other Latinos/as, "It gets me really angry, so I am just, like, I am going to prove them wrong. I do my best. I just try to show them that I am American and Mexican, but I'm me."

Serena suggested that I speak to Mrs. M, one of her teachers. I asked Mrs. M. to tell me a little about Serena, and she explained that Serena was very bright and did well on academic tasks. Mrs. M. pointed out that she was excited to learn and always wanted to know more. Her observation was that Serena had a deeper appreciation for life and the experiences of others, perhaps because her younger sister had Down syndrome. Mrs. M. said she had observed this through Serena's writing. As she explained:

We do a lot of personal writings. She has shared a lot of things about watching the disabled learn, being grateful for small steps, and that kind of thing. So I think there is a.... I think her family has taught that kind of inner sense of appreciation for learning. She is such a gracious girl. So I just assume, I don't know, that I assume from the way she acts, it has been demonstrated and appreciated at home.

Mrs. M. continued with a story about Serena running for a student body office, but not

being selected. Mrs. M. attributed her not being selected to the fact that Serena had a relatively small group of friends, so she did not get enough votes. Serena cried with Mrs. M. for a few minutes and then moved on. At least she had not mentioned the situation to Mrs. M. again.

When I asked Serena's parents how she did well in school and how they supported her I was struck by this answer:

Mas que nada, nosotros siempre le hemos dicho, 'Hija, si tu te interesas en tus estudios, eso va a ser bueno para ti. Eso no es bueno ni para tu papi ni para tu mami. Eso es tuyo. Y es la mejor herencia que te vamos a dejar. Nosotros no podemos dejarte dinero, no podemos dejarte cosa materiales, pero una educación es muy importante.' Y eso es lo que tú les puedes dar a tus hijos. Entonces yo creo que ella ha entendido muy bien ese concepto y...le echa muchas ganas.

(More than anything, we have always said, 'Daughter dedicate yourself to your studies, it will be good for you. It is not for the good of your dad or your mom. This is yours. This is the best inheritance that we can leave for you. We can't leave you money and we can't leave you material things, but an education is very important.' This is what you can give your children. So I believe that she has understood this concept very well... and it motivates her a lot.)

Serena's parents spent much time encouraging her to work hard and to find answers within herself. They consoled and helped her when she needed it and pushed her to stand on her own two feet without blaming others, even when she had been treated poorly. They also believed that the school does what it should and that the responsibility of success and inclusion rests with their family and other Latinos/as.

When I asked about students who were not doing well or had quit attending school, Serena's mother said:

Muy tristemente es el que dice, 'Los maestros son racistas, por eso mi hijo anda mal.' No es cierto. Yo siempre defiando ese punto y digo, 'No. No. No. Nadie es racista aquí, al menos que nosotros nos sintamos así. Nosotros debemos incluirnos, para que nosotros nos sintamos incluidos con todos los demás.'

(It's very sad when someone says, 'The teachers are racist and that's why my child isn't doing well.' That's not true. I always defend this point and I say, 'No. No. No. No one is racist here unless we allow ourselves to feel that way. We should include ourselves, so that we can feel included with everyone else.)

While this approach did not seem critical enough of the inequities in the school system and those who do said racist things, it did seem to provide Serena and her family with a source of inner strength that anchored their efforts to succeed in school.

Juan

Juan was an articulate but reserved student. He was thoughtful, hardworking, and highly intelligent. He had very good grades in seventh and eighth grade. He was the only student to whom I spoke who did not attribute much of his school success to follow up and encouragement from his family. He said he felt that his family wanted him to do well; however, in a matter of fact way and without any self-congratulations, he stated that he was responsible for motivating himself. Our dialogue below illustrates his perspectives.

Denny: What does your family tell you about success and college?

Juan: I mean, they say, like, 'Yeah, that's good and so you have to go to school.' Because my parents didn't go to college and they just sometimes struggle, so they tell me a lot to study, to go to college.

Denny: Do you think that's why they push you, because they want you to be...or to get those goals?

Juan: They...don't really ever push me. I am just kind of on my own. Self-motivator.

Denny: That's cool. That's kind of the next question. Do you think your family plays a role in your school or...?

Juan: Most of the time they encourage me...to stay in school, but I want to stay

in school. Because the fact is that sometimes it can be fun... sometimes. And I really do want to have a good career and for the goal I want, I do have to work at it, so...yeah.

Juan's description of less involvement by his parents and family was echoed by one of his teachers who noted that his parents were not able to come to all of his parent teacher meetings.

Although Juan seemed comfortable speaking to me and seemed to enjoy our conversations, he told me that it was unlikely that I could come to his home to speak with his parents. I asked him about meeting at the public library to talk with his parents, and he said that it might be possible. When I spoke with his mother on the phone, she made an appointment to meet with me, but did not show up. Because my efforts to meet with his family clearly made Juan and his parents uncomfortable, I abandoned my effort to set up a parent interview. One of the other students in the study hinted that the nervousness could come from the family's immigration status.

Mrs. L, the teacher that Juan suggested I interview about his success, described him as a quiet, self-motivated, and low-maintenance "worker bee" whom she loved to have as a teacher assistant. Juan told me that he thought he would like to be an automotive engineer. He was aware that this would take many years of college, but he was a little unclear about how many years or what kinds of classes he would take. He clearly connected good grades and school success with future opportunities. He was aware of the local early college high school, had spoken to his parents about it, and was highly interested in attempting to attend as he saw this as an opportunity to work toward his career goals. Juan had some positive relationships with school personnel, but did not

seem to draw on these relationships to help him navigate the school system the way many of the other students did. He described himself as likely to try to do things on his own, only asking for assistance when absolutely necessary.

Juan seemed to have some critical insights into the school system. He was confident that he knew how to succeed, but he seemed to empathize with the Latino/a students who did not do as well as he did. When I asked him directly why some students did not succeed, he said, “Because they don’t care. They just go to school because they are forced to. It’s kind of like when you force something onto a child...the more they force it, they more they hate it.” He was also willing to speak critically about what he perceived as poor teaching by some of the teachers, “They just kind of expect us...just like...they just handed us the worksheet and expected us to do it on time.” I asked him if he could give me an example of a time when he struggled with school, and he described the following incident.

Juan: Well, I mean, yeah, I feel smart at school, but there was this one time when I didn’t feel very smart because I just didn’t get it. Like during math, one thing didn’t really make sense. I kind of had to think about it for a second. Then I just had this feeling.

Denny: What did you do?

Juan: I just looked at my math book and I looked at what I wrote for that day, and then I figured it out.

He continued by saying that he rarely had incidents like this and generally felt smart in school. He seemed to place a high value on helping others, and told me about helping some of his friends. “When I can help, it is just like they always get A’s, always work harder; but, without help, they just don’t, like, care about school.” I noted some irony

here because he valued help and helped others, but he rarely sought help for himself.

When I spoke to Mrs. L., Juan's teacher, I asked her how Juan would work through a difficult problem. She said:

He's not much for talking to me. He just comes in; he's a worker. "What would you like me to do next? What can I do for you?" He keeps me so on task so I don't even have to. He keeps me running. There's just, "Oh, that's what you want me to do? Ok." Even if he doesn't know how to do it, he would ask questions. Like, it's an intrinsic thing. He's not a victim of any kind. If he doesn't understand it, he will figure it out. There's just something inside of him. I don't know why he has the drive, but he does.

Her description seemed to echo what Juan told me about his efforts to succeed in school.

She mentioned she thought he would be embarrassed if she pointed out that he was smart because he was humble and reserved. Juan said that he did work hard to prove that he could do well. He noted that while he sometimes felt smart, he would not want to brag. His good grades made his parents happy and he believed that his teachers approved because they could feel that they had taught him well.

When I asked Juan what he thought would help other Latino/a students be more successful in school, he had a pretty clear idea.

Probably a program that automatically updates their grades, their homework assignments. It would keep up to date every day. It would show all their assignments, their grades, and their citizenship marks and everything. Every assignment you can print out, and if you didn't complete it, it would tell you how to do the assignment and show you videos, and everything like that.

He thought it would be better to have a system that students could access independently rather than a place they had to go. He said that most students would probably use a program like this, but maybe a few would not be interested in school or doing well.

Jaime

Jaime was a happy and outgoing student. He was self-confident and unafraid to speak to others. Once, before the student interviews had begun, but after I had met some of the students, I was at the school making appointments. Jaime saw me in the hall. He walked up and shook my hand, asking when we would be doing the first interview. He told me he was excited to talk about school and school success. During his interviews, he also asked me if I would share the findings with the school district and if I thought it might somehow help other students. Although he was of about average size for his age, he served as something of a protector to Santiago, his stepbrother. Jaime did not seem to look for trouble, but his comments and those of other students and teachers confirmed that he would not back away from confrontation, especially in situations where he felt that he was in the right. The brothers seemed to have a strong bond. Jaime told me that they pushed each other in school and sometimes became competitive with grades and school performance.

Jaime's family strongly supported his educational efforts. His mother told me that sometimes she worried she was too demanding, but that worry was balanced by her children succeeding in school. Jaime confirmed that his mother checked his grades, attended school meetings, and was willing to push him or take away privileges to get him to focus on school. However, he also had a strong personal drive and a good relationship with his brother. He stated that he and Santiago pushed each other and worked together on homework and big or difficult assignments. He and Santiago were both in eighth grade because theirs was a blended family. Based on Jaime's account and my own

observations in the home, his family seemed loving, supportive, and well-adjusted.

However, he told me that his parents' divorce had a bigger effect on his older sisters and seemed to affect their school performance for a time.

One other challenge for Jaime's family was the economic situation that required his father to be gone for weeks at a time for work. His family was able to own their home, but his mother was the person who kept their home functioning most of the time because his father traveled as a truck driver. Jaime clearly saw the link between school success and future success. However, he had not settled on a specific career just yet: "Well, right now my goal is to succeed in school. Once I get older, I'll decide what I would want to do..." He had many relationships with adults at school and could draw on these if he had a need. However, he was likely to try to face a challenge on his own, or with assistance from his friends and family before asking for help at school.

Jaime stated that he was aware of racism and had helped his step-brother work through an incident in which two white students were calling him names. He had thought about how to confront racism and suggested that having a trusted person to talk to about how to react was important.

Jaime: It gets it out of your system, you know, like calms you down. Then you think about it, and you reanalyze and, you know, like, "Oh yes it's not possible to do that" or, like, you know.

Denny: Why is that important, do you think?

Jaime: Because when you talk to somebody and if it happens again you can fix the situation at the right time instead of reacting very quick and like pushing back.

He understood that, while it was important to respond to racism, he did not want to do it

in a way that could have negative consequences, like fighting. His family talked about how to respond to racism and his mother also told me about the incident in which his brother was teased. She was aware of it and wanted to talk to the principal about it. Jaime and Santiago did not want her to go to the school. Instead, Jaime went and spoke with the boys on Santiago's behalf and got them to stop calling him names. He felt like this was the best solution if it would work.

Mrs. H., Jaime's teacher, explained that she felt he was successful because, "He doesn't use excuses. He's here just to do his work. He gets his nose to the grindstone, and he just does what is asked of him." She explained that he was social and spent time with a wide variety of students other than his core group of friends. She spoke at length about his attitude and hard work. When I asked her if she could identify where Jaime's attitude and drive came from, she responded:

It's an internal thing with Jaime, I think. It has either come from his past teachers or experiences. He has not ever been allowed to just, you know, he has just been expected to do what everybody else is doing.

Several teachers and parents mentioned self-confidence and internal drive as factors in the success of the students in the study.

At the end of one of the interviews with Jaime, he said something that showed me that he did think about why he felt it was important to work hard. We had finished our discussion, and I had asked him if there was anything else he could tell me that would help me understand how and why he or the other students were being successful. He responded:

Jaime: Well, I don't know if you asked me the question, but you know, if you asked me why would you want to be successful – and other kids that

don't really care, you know, it seems funny. Well, if I think about it and then it's like, being successful is something good for you. You get noticed more. You'll have a more positive attitude and whatever. If you look at somebody that doesn't care, it's like saying, "Oh, you know what, I don't care about my life. I will do whatever I want." Then you end up bad, like in jail or something, or you end up doing something bad.

Denny: How did you decide that you want to do certain things? How did that get into your head?

Jaime: Well, I decided it when I've gone through struggles, some strong struggles. I look at them, and I'm like, "Oh, I can change this by doing this." If I do something good and my life will be different. You know, like not too many struggles. It will be better for me, and now I won't have to go through hard things.

It was clear that Jaime thought of school as a way to create a better life for himself and his family. This thoughtfulness about life and how to deal with challenges was typical of his responses. He also had clear expectations for himself that appeared to have evolved from his ability to think critically about his experiences.

Ana

Despite the fact Ana was one of the youngest participants, she was confident and talkative. She was bright and had good social skills. She gave the longest and most detailed responses of any of the students during the interviews. She credited her parents with a high level of support, and told me that her father especially helped and supported her in her academic efforts. She loved to play soccer and was a good athlete. She also liked singing and music. When I asked her how she succeeded in school she told me:

I mostly just try my hardest. If I need help with anything, I, like, stay after school and ask my teachers. They will give a one-on-one like help. I would sometimes ask questions about what we were learning and they will answer them. I just

basically try on my assignments and work hard.

She also understood her father's motivation in pushing and supporting her in school, "He wants to support me because he didn't get any support, and I take that advice because I don't want to turn out, like, unsuccessful, so I really want to try."

Ana's parents owned their house, which showed a level of financial resources not available to all the students in the study. Unlike most of the participants in the study, Ana had lived out of the area, in California, for a time. This may have contributed to her more sophisticated world view when compared to the other students. Her ability to look at race and racism at more than one level was reflected in this response to a question about how she thought about her identity.

Yeah, in California, there was this one person. He's like, "You're a Mexican." You know, like being racist and I didn't really like that. When someone calls me Hispanic, I like that. When people call me Mexican, I don't mind, but it reminds me of how people use it in a bad way.

This comment and her description of negotiating a situation in which her Latina peers in California teased her about being too "smart" to fit in with her Latina group, showed me that her experiences had given her a complex understanding of race and the roles each person was expected to play according to the dominant social structure.

Ana's father was the only parent I interviewed who requested to conduct the interview in English. Ana's family also differed from the other participants in the study because they lived in a nearly all white neighborhood. Her father told me that this was a conscious choice that he made when he bought the house.

I did it deliberately where I live right here, right now. Where I bought my house, I did it deliberately because of my kids. I wanted my kids, first of all, to grow up in an area where, how do you say, that is American. You know, I wanted them to

learn the American way, to live with the Americans. Not because I'm not proud of my roots and my people, but because I know that it's the way you guys have already figured it out.... I mean like I've noticed a lot of American families, they already have a structure when they get married. Even before they get married, they're already planning their lives.

At school, Ana had many Latino/a friends and did not seem to associate exclusively with any one group. It seemed like she and her family had an awareness that the social structure seems to benefit some groups more than others.

Ana's father believed that parent involvement was critical for students. "The way I think education works is, it's got to be a priority for the family...that starts with the parents." He said that he and his wife made education a priority and pushed Ana to do well. When I asked if Ana had goals and understood how the system worked he said:

She knows that, only by being educated and being successful in school, is she going to be able to become what she wants to become. She already has that clear, so she knows that if she doesn't do well in school, she is not going to make it. So, automatically, she has to be focused in school. She knows she has a goal and that she is going to meet that goal. She has to be focused in school and in her everyday life.

Ana confirmed that she and her parents spoke about the future and the importance of working hard to achieve her goals. She said that she could talk to them about everything.

Ana believed that it was important to do well in school. She believed that desire and hard work with parent support led to school success and future opportunity. However, she was not critical of the system when a student failed. Her perception of the students who failed was similar to her father's perception. They both acknowledged challenges and racism, but tended not to see inequality in the school or social system. For example, this is how Ana explained her cousin's struggles in school.

Ana: He doesn't get good grades. I think he mostly tries, but not that much,

and, like, he does do well in some subjects, but in others, he says it is just too hard. And, like, he is not a very good example for his two younger siblings because he gets in fights and just swears a lot and yeah...

Denny: Do you think that school is harder for him than it is for you? Do people treat him differently, or is he just not trying?

Ana: There's people, I guess, that think doing well in school is not a good thing.... It's like a dorky thing. I guess he takes that example, but he's also told me that he doesn't care what people think. I guess he just doesn't want to try.

Denny: Is school hard for both of you?

Ana: For me it is hard, but I still try. For him, it's really hard. He mostly tries, but after a while, he gives up.

She believed her success came from hard work and family support, and that students who were failing were likely choosing not to make an effort similar to her own.

Ana stated that in the future, she would like to become a veterinarian. She did have a fair understanding of what the educational requirements of achieving this goal would be. She had also discussed this career goal and the challenges she would face pursuing it with her parents. Her current academic efforts were driven by her desire to be able to attend college and to pursue her goal of becoming a veterinarian. She told me that she was unlikely to discuss her goals with friends. If one of her friends asked her about her future plans, she would likely tell them that she was going to be a soccer player or a singer to avoid any scrutiny or ridicule. "I don't want them to think, like, 'Why does she want to be a vet? Where did that come from?' You know...I don't want to tell them a lie...I mean, like, I shouldn't be ashamed of this." She trusted many of her teachers and described experiences in which her teachers helped her overcome academic challenges.

However, her family was her primary source of support for anything other than the academic help that she might need from a teacher.

Omar

Omar was a quiet and shy seventh grader. He was also the only one of the students in the study who had been in the English as a Second Language program during the last 2 years. He quite proudly told me that he reached the fluent level in all areas during the previous school year. However, he still had a close relationship with the ESL teacher, and the other teachers at school depended on the ESL teacher for communications to his home as Omar's parents spoke little English. Omar was intelligent and self-driven. He knew that he wanted to achieve in school and life, but he did not have a complete understanding of how to do this. In a similar fashion, his parents encouraged him to do well and monitored his grades, but did not have a good understanding of how the school system worked. He credited them for pushing him to earn good grades. Omar and his parents had a high degree of trust in the school and the school personnel. They depended heavily on the school for information and academic help. His parents valued education highly and told me that one of the main reasons they moved to the area after a brief stay in Las Vegas was for their children to have "*una escuela buena.*" (a good school)

When I asked Omar if he had ever seen or known of anyone being treated poorly because of race or identity, he said that on a TV show he had seen a family being broken up because the parents were being deported to Mexico. After the interview with his

parents, once I had shut the recorder off, his mother told me that when she recently attempted to enroll her children into a program for low cost health insurance, the authorities had discovered that she did not have legal immigration status. Her husband and the children had all been born in the United States, but she had come as a teenager. Despite actively pursuing legal means to stay with her family, she was facing the possibility of being deported to Mexico. During one of the teacher interviews, this came up again, and the teacher told me the situation had seriously affected Omar's academic efforts for about a month. He was currently doing better, but the stress was a concern for his parents and teachers.

Omar's family lived in a mobile home park where several of the student participants lived. All the homes in the immediate area were occupied by Latino/a families, and, everywhere I went, I only heard Spanish spoken. Omar had a brother 1 year older than himself, who attended the same school. This brother struggled in school and did not like going. Both brothers told me they had argued about the value of schooling for their futures. Omar thought school was important, but his brother would have preferred to work. Omar explained that he and his brother cared about each other and did many activities together, but they felt differently about school. Omar did say that he thought his brother and his parents were proud of his school performance. Their mother told me that Omar would like to be a police officer. When I asked his parents how he would reach this goal, they told me he would need to study and work hard.

Omar had good relationships with the adults at his school and was quick to seek help with his school work. His parents explained that help at school was important

because they did not believe they could provide much academic help at home. Omar also worked with friends on homework. He was intensely driven to do well. Both he and his parents told me that he would not go out with friends or sleep at night until his homework was done. He did tell me about a friend who struggled in school, explaining that, “He has a hard time at school, because he thinks it is too hard for him to do, and it’s much better to go outside and play than doing the work first.” I asked him if his friend was able to seek help in the same way he did from teachers. Omar said, “Sometimes he does, but sometimes he just gives up.”

Jorge

Like Omar, Jorge was quiet and shy, yet well-spoken during our conversations. He told me how much his parents encouraged him and they agreed. They also explained that all of their children were focused on school, from two sisters in high school to a younger brother in elementary school. The children worked together and encouraged each other academically. When I asked Jorge’s parents where they thought his drive to do well in school came from, they seemed a little surprised and said they had not really thought about it. They said, “*El ha sido asi desde chiquito.*” (He has been like this since he was small) When I asked Jorge a similar question, he replied, “My parents sacrificed a lot for me, so I want to make them proud. I want to study hard, so I can do something when I grow up.” He explained that thinking about his parents was a big motivator, and that he thought about their sacrifices almost daily.

When I asked Jorge why other Latino/a students might not do as well in school as

he did, he seemed not to have considered this type of question. With our follow up discussion, he told me that it could be because they are from somewhere else and maybe do not understand English very well. When I asked him about how race could affect the way people interact, he also did not seem to have thought about or discussed racism much. I asked him if he could think of an incident when race was an issue. He thought about it and told me he had seen a student being teased and that it was likely based on race. Jorge and his family truly seemed to not think critically about race; although, they quickly recognized racism if I gave them examples. When I asked Jorge if school success helped him push back against racism, he said, “If they’re teasing me about my race or anything like that, I just show them, like, how good I am and what I do good. Then I show them that I am not different than what they are.”

Jorge and his family stated multiple times that they strongly believed that Jorge needed to do well in school in order to succeed in the future. However, he had not thought about what career path he would like to pursue. Jorge did not seem to have a clear understanding of how school connected to future education and economic success. He simply believed it did. Jorge and his family had a high degree of trust in his school and teachers, and did not have a well-developed concept of how the school system worked. He did have good relationships with school personnel and could utilize these relationships for information or for assistance in academic work. He also had a number of positive peer relationships with other students who encouraged him to do well.

Jorge told me that his goal was to always have straight A’s. He said he was successful in school because, “I do my homework, every night, usually, if I am not busy

or anything. If not, I sometimes wake up early and do it.” I asked his parents why he did well in school, and they told me that all their children had done well in school. *“Ellos siempre han salido adelante. Desde el mayor hasta los más chiquitos. Son responsables, ellos solos de las tareas, traen buenas notas, participan en las escuela...”* (They have always done well. From the oldest to the littlest ones. They are responsible, by themselves, for homework, they earn good grades and participate in school...). When I asked Jorge’s teacher how he achieved success in school, she told me she believed it was because of his parents, even though she did not know them very well. “I attribute a lot of what kids are to what their parents are giving to them. I think he must have really great parents. They’re supporting him, so that he has enough self-esteem to move forward.”

Soledad

Soledad was an intelligent, outgoing seventh grader who earned good grades. She seemed glad to talk with me, and was excited to tell me about her success. Her current goals included getting a 4.0 GPA and doing well with her flute in her music classes. She had an older sister and an older brother. She told me that her parents and sibling encouraged her to do well in school. She stated that her older sister was doing well in school now, but had struggled in the past. She believed this was because her sister did not focus on school and spent time with friends who did not think school was important. Her brother generally did well in school, but, at times, her parents would not let him play soccer because his grades were not what they expected from him.

I saw Soledad working with her siblings and friends on school work. I also

observed her using a laptop computer at home to look up information for a school assignment when I arrived to speak to her mother. She said that she and her friends often used technology and it really helped, especially with math. When I asked how her family supported her she said:

Like, if I can't do my homework, I don't remember, my mom will always try to help me. If she can't, then my brother will help me, and my dad, usually. He didn't go to school when he was a little kid, so he wants us to do better. He helps us a lot, too.

Soledad's family lived in the same mobile home park as Omar and Jorge, but she attended the school on the other side of town because she went there before her family moved to their current home. Attending the old school was a big commitment because her parents had to drive her to school.

Most, but not all, of the families living in her area were Latino. I asked Soledad if friends were important.

Soledad: I think friends are good because even though you are actually at school, you could still have fun.

Denny: How would you describe your friends?

Soledad: White.

Denny: Do you have some Latina or Mexican friends, too?

Soledad: Yeah. It's a mix.

She told me that she had a mix of Latino/a and white friends, but it was just the way things were, not a conscious choice on her part. When I asked her if school or even life could be more challenging for Latino/a students or families, she agreed, "Maybe, they need an extra help, because they speak Spanish and stuff...and they speak English at

school...and yeah.” When we talked about racism she told me that, in elementary school, a classmate had teased her friend about being Mexican and also about her language skills. Soledad told her teacher, and the teacher and principal spoke to the student doing the teasing. The behavior stopped, but she told me that she could no longer be friends with that student. She said that her family did have conversations about race and how to react to racism. She also believed that if there was a situation involving race, she could seek help from school personnel.

Soledad’s awareness of the effect of racism was also evident in our conversation about what she would do to help all Latino/a students do well in school. “I would have a program that would just help them with everything...like racism and stuff. And probably with their language...to speak better English.” When I asked her what she meant by stopping racism, she said, “Probably, just, like, other people just making fun of them about their skin color and stuff...I think race affects us a bit. You know because there’s different people with different skin color and languages.” Soledad also told me that she thought her success was a way to push back against racism. She thought that proving that she was smart was a good way to prove racist people wrong.

Soledad would like to work for the Red Cross in the future because it would allow her to help people. She believed school success now is important to future opportunities, but did not have a detailed concept of how this relationship worked. She participated in band and in Governor’s Youth Council (a school club). She had good relationships with school personnel. She sought help from teachers if she could not find a way to complete homework on her own, but she preferred to go to family and friends first.

Carina

Carina was quiet and shy, but she seemed excited to talk to me. She was a bright and self-driven student who earned good grades. She stated that she had friends who did well in school and supported her academic efforts. Her parents encouraged her to work hard and get good grades. She talked with her parents about the future and careers. She mentioned that she might like to be a nurse, an engineer, or even a pediatrician. She and her parents knew that this would require academic success in high school and college, but they were not exactly sure how the system worked or what exactly Carina would have to do to reach these career goals. She was modest about her academic ability, but when asked directly if she felt smart in school, she said, “I do. But I don’t want to say like I am perfect or anything...but like...I think I do well.” She said that she felt that everyone could do well if they just tried hard, did homework, and kept their grades up.

Carina’s parents reported that she was self-motivated. “*Lo hace ella sola. Nosotros no le ayudamos. Ella sola hace las tareas.*” (She does it by herself. We don’t help her. She does her homework by herself.) Occasionally, she had to seek help with homework, but she was more likely to call her friends and look for answers on the internet than to ask a teacher. She liked to get good grades, but she also liked to learn. Her mother told me that when Carina was in the third grade, she did not know how to read Spanish. Her teacher discovered this and offered to help her learn. Carina met with the teacher before school to practice until she could read in Spanish. Carina had good relationships with the adults at school. She seemed to know who could help her if she needed to ask for help. However, she did not seem to talk much about her plans or

anything personal with teachers or counselors. She told me that she did know about the local early college high school and intended to apply to attend there.

When I questioned Carina about how she did well, she told me, “When I get assignments, I always make sure they’re done and when they’re done, I check them. I go all over them and then that’s all I do, just turn them in.” She seemed to believe that if students worked hard the way she did, they would be able to achieve similar success. She did agree that not all students did as well, but she placed the problem with the students. “It’s, just, they don’t try hard enough...like...just not that hard. Just do your homework and get good grades...just try.” I pressed her on this issue and finally asked her if she really did not believe that race had an effect or that school was harder or different for Latino/a students. She startled me with the following responses.

Well, I don’t think it’s different because every person, like Americans and Mexicans, they get the same assignments and not all Americans turn them in and some Mexicans do, like Latinos, I mean. We’re given the same thing...but they just don’t try... In my opinion, there’s nothing different....

So if you put a girl, a Latino/a girl, and a girl, everything is the same, just the color. There’s nothing different. They both have hair, they both have eyes, they both have everything. There’s no difference. That’s what I think about it.

Carina insisted that race was not a big factor. I asked these types of questions in various ways, and she remained solid in her viewpoint. She seemed to feel that people should not be differentiated, especially by race.

Despite my questions about future plans, Carina did not tell me that she was in a program called Educational Talent Search which encouraged lower income and first generation college students to go to college. She had visited several state universities with this group. Her parents told me about it and how Carina had returned home from each

visit excited and brimming with descriptions of the different campuses. When they realized that I did not know about this program, they told me that Carina was very worried about how to pay for college. They also explained that she was very stressed because she was born in Mexico and came with her family as a baby to the United States, and she was worried that her immigration status could prevent her from attending college. When our last interview was over and the recorder was off, Carina asked me if I thought she could attend the local early college high school if she had not been born in the United States. It was clearly a great concern for her; I did not believe that she had spoken to any school personnel about it. I realized that she was probably hesitant to trust “official” people, and that her immigration status was a profound concern for her.

Sara

Sara was an intelligent, hardworking, and talkative eighth grader. She liked school, although she was hesitant to label herself “smart.” When I pointed out that she had good grades, she said, “Well, I mean, good grades is, like, you do good in school, just, like, returning your homework and stuff. But being smart is just like knowing everything, and I don’t really know other things.” She credited her parents for encouraging her to do well in school. She also believed that her participation in the 4-H afterschool program, especially the mentor she had from third through seventh grades, had been important to her academic success. Sara told me that she could get stressed out and cry if she struggled with school work, but that she could reach out to her friends, her 4-H mentor, or her sister if she needed help.

I asked Sara if there was anything that made school difficult for Latino/a students. She told me school would be difficult if, “You didn’t speak English.” She also pointed out immigration status, “Here, mostly everyone has freedom, but, like us Latinos, well some of them, we don’t have that freedom, like we don’t have legal documents or something.” She also told me that during eighth grade her sister did not get good grades because she was rebellious and wanted to hang out with friends instead of working hard.

She wasn’t doing very well. She was like a rebel back then. She would just hang around in the hall with her friends and get tardies and stuff. Ever since then, she has really tried her best. She really wants to get into college, so she is trying to put a lot of effort into her grades and keeping her grades up.

Sara seemed to believe that students could be successful if they worked hard and made academic success a high priority. However, she also understood that Latino/a students and families faced challenges that their white peers did not.

Sara had a strong desire to go to college. She had a support structure of mentors and school personnel from whom she could seek support and information. She had experienced some overt racism and understood that she and other Latino/a students faced challenges based on race. When I asked her parents about these challenges, they told me that Sara had faced racial comments in school from others who had said things like, “Go back to your country!” or “Why are you here?” These incidents bothered Sara a lot. Her parent told her that she had to be strong and stand up for herself because, if she showed weakness, the students would keep it up and try to push her out of school. They also told her that she was intelligent because she spoke two languages and earned excellent grades. They encouraged her stand up to up to these students and to show them they were wrong.

I thought her parents’ advice and insights were powerful.

Sara's Father: *Lo que nosotros hicimos en este caso, porque molestaban mucho a mi hija, a mis dos hijas han molestado, así. Entonces, nosotros hablamos con ellas y les dijimos, 'Mira, tú eres muy inteligente y si tú eres débil con ellos, ellos van a ver que tu eres débil y todo el tiempo van abusar de ti, hasta que te harán salir de la escuela. Pero, si tu eres fuerte y les demuestras... entonces vas hacerlos ver las cosas que tú puedes hacer mejor. Y no importa lo que los demás digan.'*

(What we did in this case, because they have really harassed my daughter, both my daughters have been harassed like this. So we spoke to them and said, 'Look, you are very intelligent. If you are weak with these kids, they will see you as weak and will try to abuse you until they force you out of school. But if you are strong and you show them that... you will make them see the things that you can do better than them. It's not important what others say')

Sara's Mother: *Siempre va a estar esto hasta en la universidad. Porque siempre va haber quien las haga sentir mal. Entonces ellas deben de saber que son importantes y que pueden lograr sus metas, si se las proponen, primero. Y segundo, tienen que toparse con todas las cosas para poder crecer.*

(There will always be this [racism] even at the university. Because there will always be someone who tries to make them feel bad. So they have to know that they are important and that they can reach their goals, first. And second, they will have to bang against the hard things to grow.)

Sara told me that now she could stand up for herself, "If you ignore them, walk away, and then, they won't really pay attention to you, but if you show them a better skill you have, maybe that can prove them wrong."

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

Observations

Within the stories of these students, there were a number of clear commonalities that should be mentioned before beginning an effort to analyze beyond the surface. The most obvious thread was the amazing success in school that these students had achieved. Based on grades and attendance, their performance would place them at the top of their schools among all students, not just Latino/a students. They were hardworking and driven. They were all very bright; at the same time, the majority of them were hesitant to label themselves as “smart,” even when I directly asked them.

The students tended to describe the method they used for attaining success in school as working hard and not giving up. They all described their hard work and refusal to settle for less than excellent outcomes. This attitude was also indicative of the high expectations they and their families held for them. In one way or another, the students and their families all described the personal drive each student had as something that just comes from within. All but one of the students described a high level of family involvement and support being central to their academic success, which was corroborated by the comments of their families and teachers.

School Site

The students in this study attended middle school at two different locations within

the same school district and town. Each school had about 900 students, of whom about 7% were Latino/a. Overall, the schools were visually attractive, high quality schools. One of the schools was recently honored by The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform as a School to Watch, its award for high performing schools. The schools housed grades six to eight. Both buildings were attractive and well-maintained. The halls were wide and spacious, and the classrooms were clean and well-lit. The physical environment reflected an effort encouraging students to work hard, be kind to others, be friendly, and avoid bullying. These standards were reflected in hallway banners, placards, and signs in the commons areas and the classrooms. The general comments of the school staff also indicated an effort to be kind and fair to all. Both schools had small English as a Second Language programs to support students who were learning English.

Existing Stressful Conditions

The academic success of the students in this study was so striking that it caused me to consider the possibility that this group might not be experiencing the same stressful conditions and circumstances that often coincided with the lack of academic success among minority students. Thus, I was sensitized early in the data collection process to the existence of conditions that could cause stress in the lives and school experiences of the participants, endangering their ability to succeed in school. As I spoke with the students, their parents, and the adults at their schools, it was clear that many of the conditions that often correlate with school failure were present in their lives.

In the following paragraphs, I highlight the most salient challenges that these high

achieving students and their families faced: student and parent proficiency in English; family economic status; parent educational level and familiarity with the educational system; minority and immigration status; and exposure to racism.

Student and Parent Proficiency in English

All of the participants in the study spoke Spanish as their first language. Their parents predominantly used Spanish, and Spanish was the language spoken in the students' homes. Although all the participants were excellent speakers of English, they all had participated in language support programs at some point in their academic experiences. One student participated in his school's English as a Second Language program during the academic year prior to our interview. The student, parent, and school participants all mentioned that they believed that language ability in English was an important component of academic success or failure.

Family Economic Status

Economic status is a factor that can affect student success. When I spoke with students and parents at school and in their homes, I observed the visible signs of their economic status. In some cases, students and parents spoke directly about the economic demands of meeting the families' daily needs. One father believed that economic demands could affect student success, "*Yo pienso que por...en relación a los padres latinos es que nos enfocamos a trabajar mucho. Y...se olvida uno de las otras cosas...*" (I think that...about Latino/a parents it's that we focus a lot on work. And...we forget some other things.) Another parent commented on the challenges of a family in their

neighborhood whose children struggled in school: “...*esta persona que conocemos, los dos padres trabajan. Se van todo el día, llegan hasta la noche. Entonces los niños...solitos se van a la escuela.*” (This person who we know...both parents work.

They go to work all day and don’t return until night. So the children have to get to school all by themselves.) In my observations, none of the student participants enjoyed a high economic status. A review of student documents also indicated that all but one of the students qualified for free breakfast and lunch through the school nutrition program.

Parent Educational Level and Familiarity with the Educational System

The students and the parents to whom I was able to speak, all stated clearly that they valued education. At the same time, only one parent of a student participant had a college education, completed in Mexico. Other parents’ educational levels ranged from no education beyond some elementary, to some secondary school in the home country. One student’s mother had recently completed a GED credential in the local adult education program. The students’ parents expressed trust in the local schools and a desire for their children to attend college. However, I observed a lack of understanding of how the U.S. educational system worked and what was required for a successful transition to college from high school. The majority of the parents attended school meetings for their children and stated that they knew who to speak to at the school if they had questions or concerns about school, but they had very few sources of information about school or college beyond the school personnel or school-related programs.

Minority and Immigration Status

All of the student participants in the study were the first generation in their families to go to school exclusively in the U.S. In the study site schools, the Latino/a population comprised only 7% of the total student population, so Latino/a students were clearly a small minority. Immigration status was a related and important factor for the study participants. I did not ask direct questions about students' or families' immigrations status, but through side conversations or second-hand accounts, often with the audio recorder off, I discovered that this was an issue that affected the whole community. One mother commented:

El estado migratorio tiene mucho que ver. Nosotros sabemos que hay niños que no tienen papeles y no pueden seguir a la Universidad. Entonces desde el principio los deja en un nivel bajo porque ellos saben que al llegar a la high school y ya no pueden seguir adelante. Entonces pienso que esto sería uno de los motivos.

(Immigration status has a lot to do with it. We know that there are children who don't have papers and can't continue to college. So, from the beginning, they are at a lower level [of motivation] because they know in high school they can't go forward. So I think this would be one of the challenges.)

A teacher also explained to me that many of the parents did not have legal status. In one case, a mother was facing possible deportation to Mexico, but the rest of the family had legal immigration status. The teacher reported that this situation was having a negative effect on the academic achievement of the student participant from this family.

Exposure to Racism

When I first began to conduct the interviews, I did not hear much about racism. I began to ask more pointed questions about race and the experience of Latino/a students in

school. This closer scrutiny revealed that the student participants did face racially charged situations and comments, both within and outside of the school day. Some of these incidents were intended to be offensive and others were cases of ignorance by the offender. It seemed that this was not part of an overt pattern sanctioned by the community or schools, but rather “background noise” that emerged from structural oppression that was often not noticed or, if noticed, not attributed to racism by most observers. Some critical race theorists (Russell, 1998; Solórzano, 1995) have noted that racism is often not manifested through acts of open aggression. Instead, it occurs as small, separate incidents and exchanges that together reinforce a negative racial identity for people of color. This description of racism seemed to fit the stories shared by participants. The offensive interactions that I discovered ranged from racial slurs from whites to the student participants or their families, to Latino/a student’s jokingly referring to themselves as the “brown group” (*Somos los brown*). One thing was clear—the students and their families did experience various kinds of racism.

Frameworks for Examining Student Success

These commonalities among the student stories, as well as their individual experiences, were interesting to consider and should be examined through the perspectives of resilience, resistance, and critical race theory. This type of analysis lends theoretical context to their stories and may help explain how the students achieved success, what their successes cost them, and how their experiences can be viewed differently from different perspectives. In the following sections, I highlight how

resilience assists students in resisting the challenges that threaten their academic success, how their successes are examples of resistance, and how their unique positions as successful Latino/a students shape their views of their success, the educational system, and of those Latino/a students who are not as successful as they are.

Resilience Among the Successful Students

In light of the existing conditions that could lead to the failure of the students in the study and the fact that many of their peers were not succeeding, I began to search for explanations for their success. Clearly, the students who were succeeding were finding ways to resist the oppressive conditions mentioned above. However, not all Latino/a students in the same schools and the same district were able to do this. While the scope of this investigation was limited to students who were succeeding in school, every student participant was able to tell of a situation in which one or more of his or her peers was resisting the system through what Solórzano and Bernal (2001) have called reactionary behavior and self-defeating resistance. The following description is typical.

Juan: My friend, he's having troubles in staying in school and stuff like that so I talked to him about you need to come to school more, that you need to get good grades and I'll help you. You know, like, we are not going to cheat, but you know, helping.

Denny: ...Why do you think he is not doing well in school?

Juan: His family probably...I don't know...because most of his family are ...dropouts.

How is it then that the Latino/a students in this study were able to achieve academic success while others appeared to resist in ways that may have caused them to fail while

simultaneously reinforcing the system of oppression?

The construct of resilience may be a way to analyze this difference. Garza and colleagues (2004) stated, “Resilience is defined as the ability to confront and to resolve problems and the capacity to utilize personal or social resources to enhance limited possibilities” (p. 11). Benard (2004) asserted that every person has resources that can be drawn upon to blunt or overcome the effects of stressful conditions in life. She divides these protective factors into two general categories: Personal strengths and environmental protective factors. Examining the experiences of the successful students using the construct of resilience makes visible powerful individual strengths and positive environmental factors. These individual strengths and positive environmental factors helped explain why some students resisted oppression in ways that were beneficial to them, while others resorted to resistive behavior that was self-defeating. Personal strengths and environmental protective factors will be discussed below.

Personal Strengths

I examined the student, parent, and teacher responses for evidence of personal strengths that positively influenced their success in school. What emerged were a number of interrelated and sometimes overlapping personal strengths and abilities that these successful students possessed which supported them in the face of challenges and stress. The categories of strengths or abilities were as follows: Ability to form positive relationships; ability to communicate effectively; ability to make plans and set goals; ability to think critically; ability to believe in self and to maintain control; and ability to be hopeful and positive. These student abilities complemented and aligned with Benard’s

(2004) categories of personal strengths: Social Competence, Problem Solving, Autonomy, and Sense of Purpose. In analyzing the explanations of how the students were succeeding, I found that they possessed and were able to deploy some or all of these abilities in ways that elevated their resistance behavior to a level that allowed them to succeed in school, despite the existence of conditions that indicated they should fail. Each of these strengths and abilities will be discussed below.

Positive Relationships

During my interviews with the students, I was struck by how confident they all were as they spoke to me. They were able to communicate what they were thinking, and it was clear that they were able to evoke positive responses from a listener. It was enjoyable to spend time with them and listen to their stories. Wolin and Wolin (1993) identified the ability to form positive relationships, especially with adults as key to resilience. Werner and Smith (2001) called this ability an easy temperament and identify it as predictive of a successful transition from adolescence to adulthood. All of the students exhibited the ability to form positive relationships with their age peers and the adults in their schools.

Effective Communication

The ability to communicate effectively was important in forming positive relationships. My conversations with the students and the adults who worked with them at school indicated that they were able to maintain their self-confidence and assert themselves without offending others. Studies have highlighted the importance of

communications skill in negotiating dominate power structures to achieve academic success (Delpit, 1995; Luthar & McMahon, 1996). Ana and her father gave a good example of this. Ana had turned in an assignment that was not entered in the school grading system. This was upsetting to them and her father wanted to speak to the teacher. Ana asked him to let her deal with the situation first. She was able to resolve the situation in a positive way and avoid a potentially difficult confrontation between the teacher and her father. Many of the students faced situations with friends or school personnel in which they exhibited the ability to communicate positively and maintain good relationships without damaging their own personal expectations or self-confidence.

Planning and Goal Setting

As the students explained how they were succeeding in school, it was clear that they shared the ability to set goals, plan for success, and seek resources to assist them in executing their plans and reaching their goals. A number of longitudinal studies have found that planning behavior among adolescents leads to a sense of control, hope for the future (Schweinhart, Barnes & Wiekart, 1993; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997), and greater educational outcomes (Clausen, 1993). In the near term, the students created plans for getting good grades, including having good attendance, paying attention in class, and seeking assistance when necessary. In turn, every student had a plan to go to college. While they may not have completely understood all aspects of how to carry out their plan to go to college, they all told me that they knew that going to college would require good grades. They were then motivated to succeed in school and earn good grades to support college plans. To differing degrees, they were aware of a variety of resources available to

them and were very willing to access their resource pool when needed.

Critical Thinking

The ability to think critically about situations was a key component in school success for the students in this study. This ability allowed the student participants to face and to solve problems in productive ways. A discussion with Jaime about how he reacted to racist comments indicated a level of critical thinking ability that was common among the students.

Jaime: You shouldn't try to get in a fight with them, but... try to talk to them. Tell them, why do they do that... then you can go to a teacher or the principal or something.

Denny: Is it important to tell them to knock it off?

Jaime: Yes it is important, because maybe they will not knock it off, but they just keep doing it because you are not doing anything about it.

Denny: Should you punch them?

Jaime: Well, that's bad because you can't just be like them...attacking you then you attack them. You can't be just like them. You have to be more mature and know how to handle things better.

Like Jaime, the students showed the ability to think critically about difficult circumstances and avoid reacting in ways that could be self-damaging. I was especially struck by Jaime's understanding that it was important to challenge racist behavior. He and many other students mentioned the importance of facing and working through difficult situations rather than avoiding them. Critical thinking was an important tool in developing a critical consciousness and an awareness of the structures of oppression. This awareness prevented students from internalizing oppression and feeling like victims who did not have the ability to act (Freire, 1993; Hooks, 1994).

Self-Belief and Ability to Exert Control

Even though the student participants and their families could not often tell me how they thought they would reach their common goal of attaining a college education, they all believed deeply that it would happen. I directly asked the students if they felt smart or intelligent. While they were humble and some reframed the question to allow an answer of, “I am competent because I earn good grades,” they all exhibited confidence in their abilities to succeed in school. The students also expressed a sense of control over their outcomes in school. They told me frequently that they could work hard, stay in school, and create future opportunities for themselves. Researchers have found that the perception of control, being motivated from within, and the belief in personal effectiveness contribute to a person’s actual ability to succeed (Larson, 2000; Maddux, 2002; Thompson, 2002). Every student and parent told me about challenges, but in each case, they retained the belief that they were able to act and to exert control over the ways they chose to proceed in school and life.

Hopefulness and a Positive Outlook

Perhaps the ability to believe in themselves and their perception that they were able to choose their paths in life contributed to how hopeful and positive the students were about their educational prospects and life in general. I found that they believed that the future was bright and success was available for them if they followed through with their plans and worked hard. Werner and Smith (2001) identified confidence and hopefulness as a central component in the lives of resilient individuals, while Snyder, Rand, and Sigmon (2002) pointed to hopefulness as a key contributor in a person’s ability

to envision workable pathways in life and provide the energy for goal setting behavior. Arellano and Padilla (1996) found that an optimistic outlook and belief that success was possible despite obstacles was a key indicator of students' ability to overcome challenges and succeed academically. This may be a self-reinforcing cycle. The students experienced success in school, which strengthened their belief in themselves and a positive future, which aided additional successful school endeavors. Sara is a good example of this. She expressed her belief in the future as a motivating force when she said, "I know that I have a future ahead of me, and if I want to make it a happy future, then I have to do the things that I need to do so I can complete that." The students were echoing, and very likely, repeating what they observed in their parents. All the parents to whom I spoke strongly believed that their children could achieve a bright future through hard work and success in school.

Environmental Factors

Personal strengths as discussed above are internal resources that the students drawn upon in response to challenges in school and life. These strengths are not fixed personality traits or a guarantee that the students will be able to overcome every challenge. However, when these resources are deployed in response to stress and the students are able to have positive outcomes, resilience is manifested. In addition to personal strengths, environment protective factors support resilient outcomes in those facing adversity. Benard (2004) highlighted caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities to participate and contribute as important environmental factors that can

occur in the context of family, and school.

Home and Family

I was deeply impressed by the relationships I observed in the lives of the participants at home and in school. I was able to visit the homes of eight of the ten students in the study. In each case, the home environments were inviting and the adults in the home were caring and warm. The students also had good sibling relationships. I observed several of the students working together with their siblings to do homework or housework. In several cases, students told me that they and their siblings motivated and helped each other in school, and also defended each other in racist or difficult social situations. I also saw some of them care for younger siblings in a kind, thoughtful way. The parents with whom I was able to speak were committed to supporting their students' academic and life successes and were obviously willing to make sacrifices to assist their children. The students were aware of their parents' efforts and were motivated by them. Jorge commented, "My parents sacrificed a lot for me, so I want to make them proud. I want to study hard so I can be something when I grow up...I think about that at least once a day."

Studies of successful Latino/a students (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Perez et al., 2009) have identified family support and encouragement as key in student academic success. The students' parents had high expectations for them. They kept track of the students' school progress and asked them to do well. Most of the parents attended all school meetings and felt that participating whenever possible was very important. One mother told me that she checked with her sons every day to check up on their homework

and to see if they were missing any assignments. *“Todos los días, no se me pasa un día, sin que yo les pregunte acerca de las tareas y si tienen missing assignment o eso.”*

(Everyday, a day doesn't pass without me asking them about their homework or if they have missing assignments.) Beyond monitoring academic progress, many of the parents told me they spoke frequently with their children about the future and the need to work hard and attend to the demands of school now to have opportunity later. One student's father put it this way, *“Primero tenemos que enseñarles a nuestros hijos que lo que ellos están aprendiendo es para el bien de ellos. Si logran éxito académico, van a poder llegar a tener mejor estatus de vida.”* (First we have to teach our children that what they are learning is for their own good. If they achieve academic success they will be able to attain a better status in life.) The students' comments likewise reflected this emphasis on working hard and creating a bright future.

School

In the school environment, there were caring relationships and high expectations for the students. This is important because as Gonzalez and Padilla (1997) found, a supportive academic environment and a sense of belonging at school were significant predictors of resilience. Much of my time spent with the students occurred in the schools. During the time I spent at the school sites, I observed that teachers and administrators were able to call the students by name and would take time to discuss how they were doing in school or to ask how things were at home. A student's mother mentioned this: *“Cuando el director se encuentra con mi hijo, el le felicita y le da la mano y le dice, ‘Tu eres Jaime.’ Y veo que le motiva como el dice, ‘¿Viste que me conoce?’”* (When the

principal sees my child, he greets him and shakes his hand and says, ‘You are Jaime.’ I see that this motivates him because he will say, ‘See, he knows me.’) All the students reported that they felt welcome at school and had positive relationships with the adults at school. The students in the study reported that the adults and school staff members knew how they were doing in school and were proud of their success. Teachers and administrators at the schools viewed these students as high achievers who were likely to attend college.

High expectations and caring relationships affected the students’ own view of themselves. As Benard (1991) explained, “When the message one consistently hears—from family members, from teachers, from significant others in one’s environment—is, ‘You are a bright and capable person,’ one naturally sees oneself as a bright and capable person...” (p. 12). These high expectations were also evident in the fact that seven of the ten student participants in the study knew at least something about the early college high school in town and had been encouraged to consider enrolling by school personnel. A school administrator summed up the importance of high expectations nicely:

The three things that I have talked about to the kids over and over is to believe in yourself, to value yourself, and to invest in yourself. If we can get the kids to do those three things, then they are going to be willing to invest in themselves.

This comment was consistent with the attitudes of the other school personnel. The students in the study and their parents believed that the school expected them to do well.

Resilience Manifested Through Academic Success

Again the question: How is it that some of the Latino/a students in these schools

and this district were able to resist oppression in ways that allowed them to succeed while others in outwardly similar circumstances were not? Based on my observations and what I have been told by the students, their parents, their teachers, and other school personnel, it seemed likely that the participants in this study were drawing on personal strengths and environmental protective factors to remain engaged and able actors who resisted oppression and racism in ways that led to positive educational outcomes for them. By succeeding in the presence of stress and challenges, the students demonstrated resilience. The students have not avoided oppression or the challenges that all Latino/a students face; rather, they have conformed to the system that creates the oppression enough to resist through their personal success. The personal and environmental protective factors that allowed them to achieve resilience also helped them to avoid reactionary or self-defeating resistance which would likely have led to academic failure.

Voids in the Resilience Theory Framework

As previously noted, the construct of resilience was useful in explaining the resources and strategies that students accessed to avoid the pitfalls and stresses that go along with being a student of color in the schools they attend. Because they were resilient, they were able to conform to the system enough to achieve high levels of personal academic success. However, resilience theory does not facilitate an examination of the oppressive nature of society and the school system. It cannot be used to discuss the position that this group of students occupies as both Latino/a and academically successful. Critical Race Theory and frameworks for understanding resistance and

oppression developed by scholars like Solórzano and Bernal (2001) and Yosso (2000) were better suited to discussing the paradoxical nature of schools and schooling. Solórzano and Yosso (2001) posited that CRT is a “framework that challenges dominant ideology, which supports deficit notions about students of color” (p. 3). They continue that CRT is useful because it can “acknowledge that schools operate in contradictory ways with their potential to oppress and marginalize co-existing with their potential to emancipate and empower” (p. 3). Thus, CRT and related models can explain how students of color resist oppression and succeed, and how the success of these students cannot be interpreted as an indicator that the school environment is not oppressive.

Resistance as a Model for Understanding Student Behavior

In discussing the need for an improved model for understanding minority student resistance to oppressive social structures, Solórzano and Bernal (2001) point out that the majority of studies of resistance focus on oppositional behavior that reinforces the structures of domination. This focus leaves student resistance, which leads to success within the system and efforts to transform the system, largely unexplored. Based on Giroux’s (1983) criteria that resistance has two necessary qualities, critique of social oppression and motivation for social justice, Solórzano and Bernal created four categories or forms of resistance. These categories are reactionary behavior, self-defeating resistance, conformist resistance, and transformational resistance.

A brief description of how various student behaviors might be classified using this model will be helpful here. Students who are simply acting out or engaging in disruptive

behavior are engaging in reactionary behavior. Self-defeating resistance is a form of resistance in which the actors may have a limited critique of social oppression, but their actions are not likely to lead to positive change or social justice. Dropping out of school could be an example of self-defeating resistance. Conformist resistance is the set of actions of students who are working for social justice, but are not working to challenge or change the system of oppression. The fourth form of resistance, transformational resistance, contains both a critique of social oppression and a desire for social justice. Here students have some awareness of social conditions and oppression and are moved to action by a desire to see social justice. This type of resistance holds a much deeper understanding of oppression and the possibility of effecting social change. The authors note that this type of resistance manifests itself in different ways, but has similar qualities and attributes.

This model by Solórzano and Bernal (2001), especially the construct of conformist resistance, was useful in explaining how the Latino/a students in this study resisted oppression by succeeding academically. As they explained:

Conformist resistance refers to the oppositional behavior of students who are motivated by a need for social justice yet hold no critique of the systems of oppression. These students are motivated by a desire to struggle for social justice yet engage in activities and behaviors within a more liberal tradition. They want life chances to get better for themselves and others but are likely to blame themselves, their families, or their culture for the negative personal and social conditions. (p. 318)

The students in the study exhibited resistance from within the structures of school and society by earning good grades, attending school, and maintaining a future pathway to a college education. However, they tended to work within the system and did not seem to

think critically about the structure of their schools.

When I asked the students what could be done to make it so more Latino/a students could achieve a level of success similar to their own, their focus was frequently on what failing students could do to change. There was no criticism of how the school interacted with Latino/a students. Juan thought a school program where, “I’d teach them a lot of school stuff and like make it fun for them at the same time” would be a way to assist struggling students. Santiago thought of it as an issue of motivation.

Well a lot of students say it’s hard and stuff, but they are not really trying. They just come here like to get friends and stuff. It’s good to get friends, but you have to focus on school, too, not only friends.

Carina seemed to concur with Santiago, “Well, they could, if they don’t understand a subject and the class, they can stay after school just with the teacher and discuss what the problem is and see if they can overcome it.” Serena’s ideas were similar;

Well, if you have a choice, and if you have missing assignments, I would turn that in. If there is nothing left that you can do, I’ll ask for extra credit, so at least that would bring you a little bit higher.

These ideas about struggling Latino/a students were typical of how the students in the study viewed the issue. They, themselves, were successful, but they did not seem to be critically conscious of the role school and society played in the failure of their Latino/a peers. This view of academic success and failure fits into the above definition of conformist resistance.

Resilient Resistance

While the notion of conformist resistance provided a context for identifying the

success of the students in this study as a form of resistance, the nuances of their experiences demanded more detail. I was uncomfortable with the potential conclusion that by conforming to the system to succeed, these students' efforts were not as impressive as I believed they were, or that the challenges they faced were somehow less than those faced by other Latino/a students. Yosso's (2000) study of Chicano and Chicana college students' resistance to visual microaggressions in the media identified a form of resistance that would fall between conformist and transformational resistance in Solórzano and Delgado Bernal's model. A component of Yosso's construct of resilient resistance was a desire to "prove them wrong" by succeeding in the face of oppression. She noted that succeeding in the educational pipeline is a way for students to be resilient resisters. "It is also a process by which students strategically challenge inequality, even though they often cannot or do not fully articulate the structural nature of inequality." (Yosso, 2000, p. 182)

The students and the parents with whom I spoke clearly identified success in school as a pathway to a better life and continued educational and economic opportunity. Rather than casting this as selfish or self-serving behavior, Yosso (2000) identified this as resistance. She explained, "Resilient resistance generates from the margins—in the place of contradiction, which is the pursuit of the American Dream amidst experienced inequality. For most Chicanas and Chicanos navigating through the educational pipeline, success depends on survival" (p. 181). As previously discussed, these successful students turned to various personal and environmental resources to blunt the effects of stress and oppression, demonstrating resilience by being able to stay within the system and pursue

academic success and future opportunity.

Students who employed resilient resistance often adopted a “prove them wrong” stance in response to racism or other forms of oppression. In one form or another, I asked each student how their academic ability helped them push back against those who treated them poorly because of their race. While the students had a difficult time articulating how structural inequality affected minority students, they all had examples of racism at the individual level. Most of the students viewed their academic ability as a tool to push back against low expectations or criticisms about their race. Below are some of their responses.

- Serena: We can do better. If someone is telling us we can't, we should prove them wrong. Tell them, you know, that I can, and then show them that you can.
- Ana: Just like people say, 'You can't do this.' And you, like, show them, yeah, I can. So, you just can't say stuff about me. You have to stand up for yourself and show them that 'Yes' you can do this and that you're not a quitter.
- Omar: It's like trying not to fight with other people. Keep doing your good stuff at school and don't let nothing, don't let them get in your way.
- Santiago: People telling you like you are not going to be or do as good as them, so you have to show them that you can. You're proving them wrong by them saying you're never going to be as good as them, but you are, and you may even do it better than them.
- Juan: Because it's kind of like you just proved them wrong and you know you have proved them wrong, and they are just standing there wide-eyed, like 'What just happened here.' And you're, like, 'I am getting better grades than you so, yeah.'
- Jorge: So like if they're teasing me about my race or anything like that I just show them, like, how good I am and what I can do.

At the individual level of their personal experiences and the experiences of their families,

the students did recognize racism and oppression. While they did not associate these experiences with a larger context of oppression, their recognition of racism and oppression at an individual level and their desire to resist by “proving them wrong” and succeeding academically indicated a social consciousness and a desire to seek social justice. They were resilient resisters who were likely to continue to succeed in school despite the effects of stress they experience daily as minority race students in a system that oppresses those at the margins.

Effects of the Dominant Discourse

The academic success of the students in this study was remarkable and the students should be proud of what they had been able to accomplish. Their achievements should also be a source of pride to their parents and their school. However, it must be remembered that these students were succeeding in spite of the system, not because of it. During the interviews, I discovered that there was a normalizing, dominant discourse firmly in place, and it affected everyone involved in various ways. As has been mentioned, schools are paradoxical. They can empower students, but they can also marginalize and oppress them. Through my discussions with the students, their parents, and the adults in their school, I found evidence of deficit thinking, colorblind attitudes towards race, and a negative racial identity toward “those other” less conforming and less successful minority students. These observations are not intended to be critical of any one student, parent, or school person. However, by accepting the dominant, “white-as-normal” discourse that exists in the United States generally and locally in the school

environment, the resultant attitudes and behaviors of the participants also became part of the problem.

The study participants attributed the academic success of the students to the efforts of the students and their families. This tendency to locate success within the students and families was also true in the inverse. When I asked the students, their families, and their teachers why some students do not succeed, this failure was often attributed to a lack of effort on the failing student's part or a lack of involvement or effort by the family. One teacher, while praising Juan's efforts, commented, "Some of the other kids that I have had in the past, had the attitude, 'I do not want to be here. Send me back to Mexico! Not happening!' So I've seen that, and they don't want to learn." Another teacher who was trying to explain how some students succeed and others do not, told me:

The parents and their home life has to do a lot with this. Those parents care for their children. They do. They really do. They love their kids, and they want to work with them, but the problem is they don't know how because they have never had the discipline of a school.

This teacher's explanation seemed less insensitive than her colleague's comment, but it still framed the issue as a deficit within the parents' abilities and experience.

I received the following response from a teacher widely considered to be an exceptional classroom educator. When I asked her why Latino/a students do not always succeed in school, she said:

... I'm looking at some of my other Latino/a students and comparing. The ones who are doing well have that very strong family support. The ones that are not doing well, that's another problem there. It's the support of their family.

Here, again, I would refer to the idea that schools can oppress and liberate. The school personnel in this study worked hard and they had good intentions. I knew many of them

personally. Some of them have taught my own children. Yet when they spoke to me about school failure, there were undeniable echoes of deficit thinking. This tendency among the school personnel is similar to what Marx (2006) found in her work with preservice teachers. My purpose was not to confront teachers about racism or deficit thinking. However, I believe that in “gentle confrontations” (p. 99) about the meaning of their words, the school personnel in the study would, like Marx’s students, be shocked at the implications of their own words.

Colorblindness

How is it that a school structure that seemed to work hard in many ways to help children and seemed to care deeply about their students’ success, also seemed to blame the minority students who failed to navigate the system and their families for the failure? Dixson and Rousseau (2005) in their discussion of CRT in education, pointed out that it is common for white teachers not to question negative outcomes for minority students if they believe that they have treated all their students equally (p. 14). The refusal or inability to see that race matters and the assertion that all students are equal or have equal opportunity regardless of race is colorblindness. In their study of the deployment of CRT to affect change in a school, Riley and Ettlinger (2010) found:

Colorblind ideology interprets racial difference as non-existent, such that all Americans are subject to equal opportunity. Accordingly, this ideology interprets failure to achieve equal status on the part of minority persons as an individual (not structural) failure. The idea of colorblindness denies racial difference, thereby masking uneven opportunity relative to racial difference, and precluding policy towards developing equal opportunity. (p. 1261)

The school personnel in this study exhibited a colorblind ideology in their thinking about

the minority students who did not succeed. Unfortunately, this type of thinking was not limited to the school personnel.

The attitude that all student could succeed if they would just make the effort also extended into the thinking of the successful students and their parents. These students have succeeded by conforming to the system, and they seemed to believe that all minority students could and should follow a similar path. Similarly, Riley and Ettlinger (2010) found, “Students of color as well as white students have been enrolled in a colorblind ideology and thereby subscribe to the view that non-whites need to change their choices so as to prioritize and focus on school” (p. 1263). A quote from a student they interviewed was strikingly similar to what Carina, a student I interviewed, said:

Student: Hispanic people just don’t do their homework and things like that. They care mostly about their friends, watching TV and all that, hanging around and all that. So they don’t see school as important. (p. 1263)

Carina: Well, I don’t think it’s different because every person, like Americans and Mexicans, they get the same assignments and not all Americans turn them in and some Mexicans do, like Latinos, I mean. We’re given the same thing, but they just don’t try. In my opinion, there’s nothing different.

Both these young ladies have adopted the dominant discourse that discounts race and maintains that all people have equal opportunity.

Monforti and Sanchez (2010) found that within racial groups, it is not uncommon for more successful and more assimilated subgroups to adopt the dominant discourse, distance themselves from others within the group, and adopt a colorblind stance that blames their own minority group for any social failures or shortcomings. In this study, the students, their parents, and the adults at their school had adopted at some level the

attitude that race did not matter in school success and everyone could succeed if they tried hard enough. Their attitudes were an example of using deficit thinking to make sense of the failure of other Latino/a students and their families. Unfortunately, this line of thinking identifies the problem as deficits within the students, their families, and their culture.

As an investigator during this study, much of what I observed was enlightening, sometimes even fun or exciting. However, one common element throughout the responses from the participants, students, parents and teachers was upsetting to me personally and was difficult to decide how to address from a theoretical perspective. The common element was the level to which the dominant discourse affected the perceptions, word choices and ability to see racism of the study participants. Through CRT principles of disputing ideas like meritocracy, neutrality, colorblindness and objectivity (Matsuda et al., 1993; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001), I was able to make some sense of why this is the case, even among the Latino/a participants and families. From a policy perspective, it should be remembered that schools are a paradox, they simultaneously possess the power to liberate and oppress. Thus, the academic success of the students in this study should not be taken as evidence that the system is fine and no efforts to address the challenges that Latino/a students face need to be made. As McNeil and Valenzuela (2001) found in their study of standardized testing in Texas, concluding that a system is functioning well because a small group of Latino/a participants excel can lead to deeply flawed and damaging policy. For this study, the recommendations below note the excellent efforts of the students and their schools, but also offer suggestions that could help the schools,

their students, and parents address the tendency to accept the dominant normalizing discourse.

Recommendations

There is much in the efforts of the schools and students in this study that should be recognized. The students worked hard and cared about their school performance. Their success was remarkable because of the many existing factors that made it unlikely. The schools and the teachers were caring and put much effort into educating students. Schools stated and demonstrated an ongoing effort to provide a fair and equitable learning environment. This was most visible in the form of the schools' ongoing anti-bullying programs. These efforts were all impressive and should continue.

However, more needed to be done in an organized way to provide and develop more access to the protective personal factors and environmental resources for marginalized students and their families that were identified as key to the successful students studied in this project. Additionally, race needed to become visible in the school environment and to be discussed critically and contextually. These changes would require strategic discussions with the school staff people about white privilege and discussions about race with students to develop their critical consciousness and move them away from colorblind thinking. Efforts within this school district could begin by focusing on two specific areas—critical conversations about race, and relationships with and access to the school and school personnel. To sustain this work, the schools should make the effort an ongoing part of their professional development and school improvement plans. This

could include adopting a systemic model for creating and maintaining equity in the school environment.

Critical Conversations

The first step in creating critical conversations in the school environment would be to institute direct training and discussions of race, whiteness and colorblindness as part of the existing training and professional development regimen. Existing works, like Marx's (2006) effort to help preservice teachers recognize their own passive racial attitudes, Helms' (1990) work on developing a positive white racial identity, or McIntosh's (1997) discussion of white privilege, could serve as curricula that could help teachers and administrators recognize and discuss race and its implications in their own schools and practice. Once educators had been able to have these discussions, the next step would be for them to identify concrete ways to integrate discussions about race and whiteness into the classroom conversation with students. This effort would need to discuss issues of equity and race as part of the curriculum, but also confront any instances of oppressive behavior. Teachers and staff would also need to use caution avoid lapsing into a white as normal position, and consciously model race aware speech and behavior.

Relationships With and Access to the School and School Personnel

The majority of the students and families in the study identified feeling comfortable with the school, teachers and administrators, and knowing who to approach at school for help as an important element in the students' academic success. As was noted in the analysis of student resiliency as a way to go beyond self-defeating resistance,

these relationships seemed to increase the likelihood that student resistance would be resilient resistance rather than resistive behavior that would lead to school failure.

Activities that brought the students and their family members into the school for positive reasons would be an excellent way to familiarize them with school environment and help them get to know the teachers and administrators to contact when they needed assistance. Each school had several faculty or staff members who spoke Spanish. It would be valuable for parents who did not speak English well to have a way to contact a school person who could speak Spanish with them when they needed to contact the school or seek help for their students. Family members made positive comments about teachers and administrators who recognized them and called them by name. If the school made this type of an effort to reach out to the families of their Latino/a students, the relationships that formed would help break down barriers. For the parents, it would make the schools seem less distant and hostile. The effort would also help the school personnel understand the strengths of their students' families, and make them less likely to locate the cause of the students' struggles within their families or their culture.

Making the Effort Ongoing and Systemic

The schools should make the work to address race and student success part of their professional development and school quality practices. This work would be more likely to continue and become part of the school professional practices if the staff investigated and selected a model on which to base their efforts. A systematic model that could be employed is Principles of Social Justice in Education, an example that Carlisle, Jackson, and George (2006) discussed based on their work to develop a social justice

environment in schools. The authors provide a model that consists of five central principles: Inclusion and equity, high expectations, reciprocal community relationships, system-wide approach, and direct social justice education and intervention. This suggested model or one based on similar core principles could also integrate and coexist with the current Utah Effective Teaching Standards (Utah State Office of Education, 2012) and the mission, goals and beliefs of this school district.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The efforts and success of the students in this study were extraordinary. In spite of daily challenges and factors that might indicate they should not be successful in school, they achieved excellent grades and created continuing academic opportunities for themselves. I found that they experienced challenges in the following areas: Student and parent proficiency in English; family economic status; low parent educational level and familiarity with the educational system; minority and immigration status; and exposure to racism. They were able to be resilient by drawing on protective factors that help to blunt the effects of these stressors. These protective factors were a combination of personal strengths and abilities, and environmental factors in their homes and schools. Their resilience assisted them in remaining in the educational pipeline and attaining levels of academic success which they employed to resist the oppressive conditions they experienced.

Through their resilience, the students were able to conform to the system enough to succeed. They understood that their success was a way to push back against racism and resist the oppression they faced, thus achieving resilient resistance. By surviving within the educational pipeline through resilient resistance, the students were able to maintain future educational opportunities and potential economic successes for themselves and their families.

The study also reveals that the academic success of this group of students should not be accepted as evidence that the school environment offers equal opportunity to all

students of color. McNeil and Valenzuela (2001) noted, in their study of standardized testing as school reform, that apparent success can be dangerously misinterpreted and over generalized. In this study it was clear that many of the school personnel and, sometimes, the students and parents themselves, had adopted a colorblind ideology. This line of thinking assumes that race does not matter and that all students have equal opportunity regardless of race. It also assumes that all students of color can achieve success if they would just make the effort. Such thinking is dangerous because it can preclude efforts to create policies designed to develop equal opportunities for all students.

This study identifies the need for schools to have critical conversations about race. Teachers should be exposed to and have the opportunity to discuss what whiteness means, as well as the unseen advantages it confers at the expense of non-white persons. Students should have the opportunity to critically discuss race and begin developing positive racial identities. The schools should develop relationships with the communities of people of color they serve. These parents and their students would be well-served if they had access to positive relationships with school personnel and understood how the school system operates. This type of positive contact could raise the expectations of schools, the parents, and their students. Such an effort could also expand students' access to the personal protective factors that the successful students in this study deployed to remain resilient when responding to challenges and stress at school and in their personal lives.

I believe that this study contributes to a growing body of literature that attempts to examine the success of students of color. It will be of interest to those who use critical

race theory and its related theoretical constructs to explore the contradictory ways that school systems oppress and empower students of color who strive to survive and succeed within and through them. It will also be of interest to those who use resilience theory to study the positive development of youth who draw on protective factors, including their own personal strengths and the environmental resources of their families, schools and communities. This study has attempted to provide a bridge between theories of resistance and resilience by highlighting the ways that resilient students access the protective factors available to them and thus achieve levels of resistance that allow them to challenge system oppression rather than resisting in ways that cause them to fail and reinforce the systems of oppression.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions for Students (1st Interview)

1. How are you succeeding in school?
2. What people, organizations, or things about you help you in school?
3. Are there people or situations that make school hard?
4. Why do you think that some students are not as successful as you in school?
5. Think about someone who struggles in school. What specific things make them struggle?
6. Do you feel smart in school?
7. What makes you feel smart or not smart?
8. What are your goals in school? For the future?
9. How will you reach these goals? Who/what will help you?
10. Do you participate in any school programs?
11. What role does your family play in school?
12. How do your siblings do in school? Why? How does this affect your school performance and attitude about school?
13. What role do your teacher, principal and other school people play in your schooling?
14. Do your teacher and your school do a good job helping you succeed? How?
15. What role do friends play in your schooling?
16. Do you consider yourself Latino/Hispanic/Mexican?
17. How does your identity affect you at school or other places?
18. Do you ever act differently at home or with friends than you do at school?
19. Have you ever been poorly treated because of your identity?
20. Have you seen or know of others who were treated poorly because their identities?
21. Success can mean different things. What does success mean to you in general?
Academic success?

Interview Questions for Students (2nd Interview)

1. What things cause stress in life for Latino/a students and families? Immigration status, finance, race?
2. Is school or life equal for all or can it be harder or just different for minority groups like Latinos? What things are harder or different for Latinos?
3. Can you think of any challenges or situations that could make you fail at school?
4. What could make it so that students who are failing could do as well as you?
5. Why do you work hard?
6. Why is school important? Why do you care about doing well?
7. What does your success mean to you? To your family, to your teachers?
8. If you were in charge of creating a program to help all Latino/a students do well in school, what would your program look like/do?
9. I haven't heard very much about racism during the interviews; even though, I have asked about it? Why do you think that is? (Joke story)
10. Mrs. Murphy says, "Prove them wrong." What do you think she means? Is it okay or the best way to react like this?
11. Is your success a push back for circumstances that make it hard for Latino/a students to do well?
12. Does your hard work and you challenges look the same to everyone? You, your parents, teachers, a person who is racist?
13. Mr. Aitken—Explain that the school tries hard to stop racism and bullying and that he thinks it does a good job. I asked, "Does race matter?" He said, "I don't see how it can't. It's human nature to notice differences and to group with those we feel are like us. We also might treat differently or distrust those who seem different?" How do you think race affects us?
14. Are there any forums or opportunities to talk about race or what it means to be Latino? Challenges?

Interview Questions for Parents and Teachers

1. How is your student succeeding in school?
2. What people, organizations or things help your student succeed in school?
3. Are there people, barriers or situations that make school hard for your student?
4. Why do you think that some similar students are not as successful in school as your student?
5. Is your student smart?
6. Do you think your student believes that she/he is smart?
7. Do you think that your student has goals regarding school? The future?
8. Do you have goals for your student?
9. What barriers to these goals does your student face?
10. What assistance or resources can your student count on in reaching these goals?
11. What role does your student's family play in school success?
12. How do your student's siblings do in school? How does this affect your student's school performance and attitude about school?
13. What role do your student's teacher, principal and other school staff play in school success?
14. Do your student's friends play a role in school success?
15. Does your student participate in any school programs or activities?
16. Would you say your student would identify him/herself as Latino/a?
17. Does your student's race/identity affect him/her at school or other places?
18. Has your student ever been treated poorly because of race/identity?
19. Have you ever seen or been aware of people in this community/school who have been treated poorly because of race or identity?
20. Success can mean different things. What does success mean to you in general?
Academic success?

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